This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07485044 1

M[illegible]REDITOR

• • MRS. ALEXANDER • •

THE LOTOS
LIBRARY

NC
Hect

F

AUG 1897
F

THE LOTOS LIBRARY.

Issued at Intervals.
Illustrated. 16mo. Buckram, 75 cents.

"The *Lotos Library* is becoming almost a guarantee of excellence, so well chosen are the tales which compose it."—*Detroit Free Press.*

BY ELIZABETH PHIPPS TRAIN

A Social Highwayman.
The Autobiography of a Professional Beauty.
A Marital Liability.

BY HARRIET RIDDLE DAVIS

In Sight of the Goddess.

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN

A Marriage by Capture.

BY JULIAN HAWTHORNE

The Golden Fleece.

BY MARIE CORELLI

Jane.

BY CAPTAIN CHARLES KING, U.S.A.

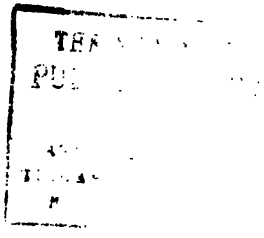
A Tame Surrender.

BY T. JENKINS HAINS

Captain Gore's Courtship.

BY LOUIS BECKE

By Reef and Palm. His Native Wife.



"And there's mother and Winnie going to the gate."

Page 85.

MRS. CRICHTON'S CREDITOR

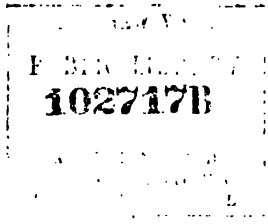
BY

Mrs. Alexander

AUTHOR OF "A FIGHT WITH FATE," "FOUND WANTING," "FOR HIS SAKE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

PHILADELPHIA
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
1897


102717B

COPYRIGHT, 1895 AND 1897,
BY
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

"And there's mother and Winnie going to the gate" . . . . . *Frontispiece.*

"May I venture to introduce myself to you?" 21

"I would take a brooch to exchange for a little ready money" 100

At last he permitted himself to call on Mr. Crichton at his office 104

MRS. CRICHTON'S CREDITOR

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG man of twenty-five or thirty, descending the steps of the Junior United Service Club one bright, blowy, dusty March afternoon, turned right, into Regent Street, and walked towards Piccadilly. He was slightly above middle height, and strongly built, well dressed, but not fashionable-looking. There was a roll in his walk that did not seem like the gait of a man habituated to streets, and his aspect, his tanned face, his good-humored but resolute gray eyes, showed none of the immobility of an experienced man of the world; rather they seemed pleased with everything they looked upon. This was natural enough, for Lieutenant Norman Adair, R.N., had lately

inherited a handsome and unexpected fortune, and so, after a boyhood and youth of very straitened circumstances, suddenly found himself possessed of ample means, while life was still fresh.

He walked along leisurely, pausing every now and then to look up and down the street.

"Not a hansom in sight," he said, half aloud. "Town is wonderfully full. Halloo, there's an old Kilburn Red, by Jove! I'll try the knife-board once more, for old acquaintance' sake. A very familiar acquaintance it used to be."

He hailed the omnibus and clambered actively to a seat on the driver's left, lit a cigar, and was soon in high chat with the shrewd old Jehu.

It was more than four years since Adair had been in London, and there were many changes and improvements to discuss. Gradually, however, the conversation slackened, as visions of many a by-gone journey along the same route came crowding up from memory's stores.

Thank God, he thought, he had been able to send his mother and sisters to spend the winter in Italy, away from the monotonous

mediocrity of a small abode in the neighborhood of Maida Vale, the goal of his present excursion, undertaken to fulfil a promise to his mother that he would call on a next-door neighbor of his, to whom they were indebted for much kindly attention.

"Do you still change horses hereabouts?" he asked, observing the driver tighten his reins and press his foot on the brake as they neared Church Street.

"Yes, sir. They do talk of changing at the Cock, but, for my part, I don't see as how the 'osses is to do it."

Here they came to a stand-still, and Adair recognized the archway into a stable yard, whence an hostler was leading a pair of rough but not ill-conditioned horses. He had stopped there often before, and knew the physiognomy of the place. An exceedingly odoriferous fish-shop was at the farther side of the arch, and on the side next him a well-stocked pawnbroker's shop, the large window crowded with parcels of knives and forks, open cases showing silver cups, spoons, ornamental implements for needlework, jewelry, birthday- and christening-gifts, clocks, umbrellas, mathematical instruments,—nothing too precious, nothing too insignificant,

to escape the voracious maw of inexorable necessity.

"What tragedies the contents of that window could reveal!" thought Adair, gazing down upon it, for his feet were nearly on a level with the higher panes. As he gazed he found he could see into the interior of the shop, between a dish-cover and an Indian china vase. His attention was caught by two figures within: one, a greasy dark young man with a very large nose, was bending over the counter, inspecting the contents of a jewel-case; the other, a lady,—yes, certainly a lady,—with well-defined but delicate eyebrows, glossy fair hair, and a sweet curved mouth, which, as Adair watched intently, smiled pleasantly on the dark young man and said something, of course inaudible to her unseen witness. She wore a black lace bonnet with something blue in it, and some dark covering on her shoulders. Her eyes were hidden from him, looking down as he did, but there was something in the shape of her face and the pose of her head which seemed oddly familiar to him and strangely fascinating.

While Adair looked, the dark young man closed the jewel-case and went away. The

lady sat down by the counter, put her elbow upon it, and rested her head on her hand, displaying a white throat, the graceful bend of which Adair fancied expressed despondency.

At this point in the drama the omnibus gave a sudden jerk, and he was swept away from the contemplation of the curious little scene, which roused his most profound interest.

Twenty theories sprang up in his imagination, between the pawnbroker's and Winchester Avenue, his destination, as to what could possibly bring so highbred-looking a gentlewoman into such an unsuitable locality.

"But, after all," he mused, "the chances and changes of impecuniosity make all alike liable to seek favors from the universal relative. She may have a spendthrift husband or brother, or an 'habitual inebriate' for a father. At all events, it is an infamous shame that a refined, delicate creature like that should be obliged to come in contact with low fellows and be forced into so trying a position. Poverty and difficulty are deucedly hard on women, well-bred women especially."

This sage reflection brought him to the corner of Winchester Avenue.

Norman Adair was on the surface a good-natured, good-humored fellow, and not inclined to waste energy or opposition on trifles; he was therefore easily detained by his mother's rather garrulous friend, and induced, by much pressing, to swallow a large cup of very sweet, hot, weak tea; but at last he escaped, leaving a most agreeable impression on the mind of the tea-maker.

He was glad to walk briskly away towards town and let his imagination dwell upon the face he had seen framed in between the dish-cover and the china vase, which had fixed itself so firmly in his mind. It was fair and fresh, and yet it was not girlish. There was a certain strength in it. He wished he could see it again; but that was not likely.

Adair was a great admirer of beauty, in a hearty, honest way; indeed, his heart was quite accustomed to be lost and found again, in many climates and latitudes; but no charmer, charm she never so potently, ever long diverted his thoughts from his profession. Even now he intended going to sea again as soon as he could get a berth.

Here he turned at the tinkle of a cab-bell,

and saw an approaching hansom; but it had a passenger, and he lowered the cane he had raised to hail it.

The next moment a voice he knew called to the driver to stop, and then cried, "Halloo, Adair! Going my way? Come along."

Adair recognized a young dragoon officer whose acquaintance he had made abroad and renewed since his return to town, where they had become rather chums.

"I'm going to look at a horse somewhere near Regent's Park. Come along, if you have nothing better to do; though I don't suppose horses have been much in your line."

"No, not of late years; but as a boy I was desperately fond of riding. We lived in a hunting country, and I often got a mount, for I by no means disdained the friendship of huntsmen and grooms."

"Lucky fellow, to have the means of setting up a stable of your own."

"It will not be much good to me when I am afloat."

They bowled away, talking with animation about the various subjects dear to the hearts of young men; and time flew fast in

the congenial occupation of examining the horses exhibited by the dealer they went to see.

It was late when Adair reached his hotel, and he found he had barely time to dress and drive to Harley Square, South Kensington, where he was to dine. He was a good deal struck by the number of invitations he had received since his return to London. Every one he had ever known seemed to be delighted to see him and to lavish hospitality upon him. He was quite aware that it was by no means a personal tribute, but he accepted everything as it came, without any cynical reflections, but valuing these attentions at their proper worth.

As he expected, Adair was the last to arrive, and while the host shook hands with him he uttered a short emphatic "Dinner" to the servant. "Afraid I am a little late, Mrs. Grey," said Adair apologetically to the hostess, a plump, richly dressed woman, with many jewels disposed about her person.

"Oh, you are just in time," she answered, benignly.—"Here, Marian," to a very slim, elegant girl in white, "let me introduce Mr. Adair to you. He was on board the Firefly with your brother Frank.—Will

you take my daughter down to dinner?" At the same moment the solemn tones of the butler sounded above the buzz of conversation, "Dinner is on the table," and the guests began to move off. It was a large gathering, and Adair had advanced but a very few paces from the door when the elders of the party began to file past him, and he was at once addressed by his new acquaintance with some tender inquiries respecting Frank, so he did not notice any one till they were all seated at table.

Mr. Grey was commercially connected with Calcutta, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and they were now succeeding in a fairly good class of London society with the facility which awaits those whose purses are well lined and who are liberal in distributing the lining.

"Where is your brother now?" asked Adair, as he unfolded his napkin.

"He is on board the Calliope."

"Ah! she's on the Mediterranean station. He is lucky. It's a delightful——" He paused abruptly, forgetting what he was going to say and to whom he was going to say it, in the extreme surprise which seized him as his eyes encountered those of his

opposite neighbor. She sat on the host's left, a somewhat ferocious-looking dowager occupying the place of honor. She was distinguished in style; her small, well-set-on head was decorated only by its own blond shining tresses, which were sufficiently wavy and profuse to form an abundant coiffure. Extremely fair with a rich creamy fairness, her eyes were deeply gray, with long lashes and straight eyebrows, both darker than might have been expected from her hair and complexion. The curves of her mouth were sweet but firm. She wore a dress of fine black lace over silk, also black, made in demi-toilette fashion, then much rarer than at present, her snowy neck showing through the filmy covering. Her only ornament was a brilliant star of diamonds which fastened a black velvet ribbon round her throat, and two or three Marshal Niel roses with their glossy dark green leaves, fastened where the lace of her bodice crossed low on her bosom.

Adair had often seen more faultlessly beautiful women, but never one whose expression, so animated, so winning, charmed him as hers did.

While he gazed, she addressed her host

with a smile which turned Adair's surprise and hesitation into astonished certainty. Yes, this charming, queenly woman was the same he had beheld that afternoon in a petty pawnbroker's shop in Edgware Road, and the pity he had lavished on her was probably thrown away. What business had a woman of her means and position to be in such a place. It was probably some reckless, disgraceful extravagance which drove her there. But, after all, who could tell? Somehow, her face and the turn of her neck as she inclined her head to her host were quite familiar to him. Where had he seen her before?

By this time the soup was over and the salmon was going round. Adair felt that he had neglected his fair neighbor, so started afresh:

"And how does Frank—your brother—like the Mediterranean?"

"Oh, very much indeed. I want papa to take us to Malta next winter. Frank says there is a great deal going on there in the winter."

"Yes, there is,—lots. Pray, who is the lady in black opposite? I fancy I know her."

"In black lace? Oh, Mrs. Crichton.

She is considered very handsome and agreeable."

"Ah, indeed. I don't think I know any one of that name. Who was she before her marriage?"

"I haven't an idea. I think mother knows."

Baffled for the moment, Adair resumed his study of the lady opposite him, while the talk grew more fluent and general.

"I must say, if D—— or L—— could look out of their graves, they'd be glad to go back to them," cried a thin, bony, well-set-up old man with a saffron complexion and large gray moustache. "The way the natives are allowed to talk, and swagger, and publish their native press, and abuse their betters, is enough to raise the shade of Clive. We are cutting a stick to beat our own backs."

"The extraordinary development of æsthetic taste," said a lady with a wild growth of dark hair, through which a gold bandeau gleamed, while a garment like a white satin night-gown hung from her shoulders, "is the great feature of the age, and is no doubt the precursor of a burst of heroic poetry."

"I assure you I have it from the best authority that the prince has taken five to three against Gloriana for the Derby."

"Hock or champagne," whispered the butler, in confidential tones.

Through the babble Adair caught the voice of his opposite neighbor, soft, rich, somewhat deep tones, though he could not exactly distinguish her words. A large épergne stood between him and the object of his observation, but he was fortunate in finding a loop-hole between the branches and blossoms that decorated it, through which he could see without being seen. Mrs. Crichton was evidently much interested and amused by the conversation of her left-hand neighbor, and Adair thought he had never before watched so bright and speaking a face.

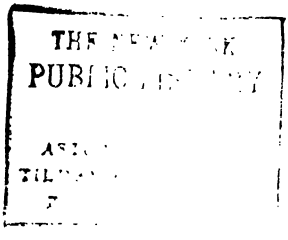
Miss Grey did not find him a very satisfactory companion. He was so preoccupied that she was obliged to take refuge with the gentleman on her other side and leave Adair to his own thoughts.

Shortly before the ladies left the room there was a momentary lull, and Adair distinctly heard Mrs. Crichton say, "No, I do not agree with you. I think it is mere spe-

cial pleading;" and then he recognized the voice, and knew why the face seemed familiar to him. The mist rolled away from his memory: he had a swift vision of a little ivy-covered parsonage with an old Norman village church close by; of a meadow and bit of pasture where the parson's cow grazed peacefully; of autumn-tinted woods beyond, through which a trout-stream from the distant blue hills ran babbling and chafing against big gray stones; of his own early home, a rambling old-fashioned house at the entrance of the village; and of happy, heedless, boyish days. Ah, he knew all about his charming, puzzling neighbor now: he would introduce himself in the drawing-room. How changed his former playfellow was! She had developed into a woman of the world, mistress of herself, ready of speech, guarded, but gracious.

How interminably the men sat on! What bosh they talked about politics, and stocks, and the probabilities of war in the East! The only object of interest to the impatient sailor was a gentleman who had moved up nearer his host when the ladies left the room, and who was addressed as Mr. Crichton. He was short, or his breadth made

"May I venture to introduce myself to you?"


PUBLIC

him seem short, yet he was not fleshy; his size consisted of bone and muscle. He was very dark,—a handsome man, with regular features and nearly black eyes. Adair didn't like them; they were impatient, almost fierce, eyes, yet shifty, and never quite steady under another's gaze. His accent sounded rather Scotch to Adair, but he spoke little, and that little chiefly about India, while he smoked diligently.

At last the old Indian colonel made a move, and Adair gladly followed him upstairs.

Miss Grey and a young sister were performing a somewhat noisy duet on a fine new Erard piano, to which Mrs. Crichton sat listening in the comfortable corner of a sofa at some distance. Adair paused a moment, and then went straight to her.

"May I venture to introduce myself to you?" he asked, with a frank smile and an admiring glance in his steady eyes.

Mrs. Crichton looked up, a little startled, and bent her head, saying, with a certain gracious gravity, "Certainly."

"Then let me remind you that in days gone by Constance Hill and Norman Adair were very good friends, in spite of many

quarrels and great differences of opinion."

"Norman Adair!" she exclaimed, in great surprise, straightening from her semi-recumbent attitude. "Do you mean to say you are Norman Adair? You are greatly changed: that large moustache, and your height! You have grown so tall! Ah, yes, it *is* Norman." She stretched out her hand to him with a smile. "I am very, very glad to meet you." And she gathered her gown closer to make room for him beside her.

Adair, his heart beating with a degree of triumph and pleasure at which he was himself amused, gladly accepted the tacit invitation. "You puzzled me all through dinner," he said. "It was only when I heard your voice distinctly that I remembered. You are changed, too,—very much changed. You seem older, and——"

"I have always heard that sailors are the bravest of the brave," she interrupted, laughing; "but your daring is something quite extraordinary, to tell a woman to her face that she looks older."

"Yes: isn't it uncouth? But it is true; and I don't know that any one would willingly exchange your present for your past."

"Except myself, perhaps," she said, with a quick sigh. "How long is it since we met, Norman?"

"Close on twelve years. After my mother left Altringham and settled in London, I quite lost sight of you. One is afraid to inquire for any one. I did hear you had lost your father: what a capital fellow he was! But Mary, your sister, who was so delicate——?"

"She still lives and suffers," said Mrs. Crichton, looking down, while a slight quiver passed over her lips. "Where are your mother and sister?"

"I insisted on their going to St. Remo for the winter. My mother always has a terrible cough, and Effie is not strong." He went on to tell her of his good fortune, at once adopting a friendly familiarity of tone that she readily reciprocated.

She questioned him as to his career and prospects. "I am glad you are rich, Norman," she said, after a short pause. "I have lived for the last eight or nine years in an atmosphere of wealth. Not that Mr. Crichton is rich,—at least, rich enough to please himself,—but we live among rich people, and at any rate I have learned to

think filthy lucre the most important, the most essential thing in the world."

"Then you *must* be changed," he cried. "You used to be the most exalted heroine possible. Don't you remember how we used to quarrel, and how heartily you despised me as a low-minded practical individual? You were quite cruel."

"My cruelty made but small impression on you," she said, laughing. "You were a most unsentimental pickle of a boy. But you must come and see me, Norman. I have three sweet babies,—at least, very sweet to me; the eldest is seven. When will you come?"

"To-morrow," Adair, returned, promptly. "At what time?"

"I am always at home at tea-time,—five o'clock. Write down my address."

"Trust me, I shall not forget," said Adair, emphatically.

"Don't trust your memory. Nineteen, Sutherland Gardens,—at the other side, the unfashionable side of the Park.—George," she said, as her husband approached, "I have found an old friend. Let me introduce Mr. Norman Adair to you: perhaps I ought to say Lieutenant Adair."

Mr. Crichton bowed and shook hands cordially; then he drew a chair near his wife and joined in the conversation. Adair watched him closely. His manner was plain and rather heavy, but in no way common or ill-bred. He was not very fluent, and Adair noticed that his wife frequently gave him a lift over small difficulties with wonderfully delicate tact.

At last Mr. Crichton looked at his watch and remarked that it wanted only a quarter to eleven; whereupon she immediately rose and wished her old acquaintance good-night, adding, "Pray come and see me."

"You must settle with Mr. Adair what day he will dine with us, and get one or two of our Indian friends to meet him. I think you have been a good deal abroad," said Crichton, hospitably, and, again shaking hands with him, followed Mrs. Crichton to make their adieux to the hostess.

Adair left soon after. It was a fine clear night, so he lit a cigar and strolled homeward in deep thought. Yes, it was true that in the old times he was often at war with Constance Hill. She thought no end of herself; and her tongue was both sharp and quick,—far quicker than his; but she was

a brick in spite of it all. And now what a charming woman she had become! That Crichton was a lucky fellow. Why, if she were free, Adair thought, he would have been inclined to have a try for her himself; but she was married, and there was an end of it. How he wished he had never pried into that infernal pawnbroker's! What extraordinary chance could have taken her there? Did Crichton know it? No, he felt pretty sure Crichton did not; though they seemed very good friends. Stay: he had always heard women would go into queer places in search of bargains. Something had caught her eye in the window; some bauble, dirt-cheap. What a blockhead he was not to have thought of this before!

This idea gave him great comfort. Adair's idea of what a good woman ought to be was very exalted, and that a creature who had so suddenly captivated his imagination should have any dealings, save picking up a bargain (and even that she had better have left alone), with such people and in such a place, was infinitely revolting to him. She was evidently the wife of a rich man: she could have no legitimate need for transactions with a pawnbroker.

CHAPTER II.

TIME seemed to drag frightfully next day.

Adair had to see his solicitor and stock-broker; for property, as well as poverty, has its cares. These engagements helped the moments to pass till five o'clock. The last strokes of the hour were sounding from a neighboring church when he rang the bell at Mr. Crichton's door.

Sutherland Gardens, in the front, were nothing more nor less than a street, but behind the house lay a large piece of ground, well planned and laid out, on which most of the best rooms opened. It was a large, comfortable abode, but not exactly a mansion. Adair was admitted by a typically neat parlor-maid, who ushered him up-stairs past a pretty conservatory to a solemn drawing-room oppressively furnished with buhl cabinets, velvet-like carpets, richly-covered chairs

and sofas, heavy portières and curtains, elaborate china, bronze, and ivory ornaments, among which Indian productions prevailed. The blinds were down, and the general aspect of the apartment was funereal. With a request that he would sit down, the servant left him to his own reflections. Before he had time to do more than glance round, Mrs. Crichton entered. She was very simply dressed in a gown of dark blue cashmere and velvet, but nothing could make her figure look other than graceful and stately.

"Very glad to see you!" she exclaimed, giving him her hand. "You ought not to have been put in this dreary room. I should commit suicide if I sat alone here. Come down to my little sanctum."

"By all means," Adair returned, and he followed her down-stairs to a pleasant parlor with a bay-window which opened on the garden. It was larger than back rooms generally are in London, and abundantly furnished,—a large useful table, dwarf book-cases, a comfortable sofa, a small cottage piano, a big work-basket well filled, some glasses, a bowl full of flowers, and plenty of sunshine,—evidently the abode of an active, industrious woman.

"There, that is a comfortable corner. Mr. Crichton likes that chair whenever he comes in here," she said. "Do you know, it is very good of you to come all the way from the gauds and gayeties of fashionable life to this bourgeois quarter?"

"Very good to myself," he returned, taking the place assigned him, and looking attentively at her, to trace what was the change which left her so unlike, while still so like, what she had formerly been. "You know I am a stranger in London: I never stayed here long; it was too expensive a pleasure to indulge in, formerly. Now I intend to enjoy it, at any rate for a while."

"And then go to sea again?"

"Yes: that is the life I like best."

Here tea was brought in, with a dainty dish of buttered toast, crisp and hot.

"I hope you don't disdain tea?" asked Mrs. Crichton.

"It is my favorite beverage."

"And tell me more about yourself," she continued, handing him a cup.

"I don't think I have anything to add to what I told you last night. I have got on fairly well, considering I had no interest. I came home every three years or so, to have

a peep at my mother and sister, and then about a year ago my father's cousin, a bit of a miser, died rather suddenly, and left no will, so I came in for all he possessed, which is a good lot more than any one expected. I was away on the South American station when that happened, and I only got home in December: so it's something very new, and, I must say, delightful, to find myself permanently flush of cash."

"Well, it is quite possible that by and by you may grow accustomed to it and think you haven't enough. Oh, Norman, try never to grow greedy about money: it is a terrible hunger! but I am so glad you have it: the want of it is cruel, degrading, miserable."

"I am glad to see, Mrs. Crichton," said Adair, looking round, "that you are not afflicted in that way."

"Oh, no, of course my husband is well off; but that is not like, not quite like, having money of one's own."

"Isn't it?" said Adair, opening his honest eyes. "I fancy I should be very much riled if my wife didn't consider my belongings as hers too."

"Would you?" cried Mrs. Crichton. She

laughed as if much amused, yet there was a curious ring of sadness about the sound as it ceased. "I suppose some men are like that. But if your wife brought you in long milliners' bills, you would not like that? You would prefer her keeping within the limits of her allowance."

"I fancy the woman *I* am going to fall in love with would be too well principled to run heavy bills."

Mrs. Crichton slowly shook her head. "It is hard to tell in advance who or what will take your fancy."

"Why should I not marry a woman like you? I am sure you could be trusted with anything, and——"

"Hush!" she interrupted, with a quick flush, and then with an air of solemn mockery added, "Ah, you see, the difficulty would be to find anything like me anywhere."

"I am quite ready to believe that," Adair replied, with laughing eyes, as he doubled up a thin slice of bread-and-butter. "I remember what a first-rate girl you were at the parsonage long ago,—how you used to do everything for every one,—ay, and took command of every one into the bargain."

"Ah, Norman, that girl has disappeared: she has been swept away down the rapids of Time's stream. This is a woman who has learned the limits of her own power and capabilities. I have been at school since we met. You know I married a man older and richer than myself. He was very generous and disinterested; he took me for myself alone; and it was my duty and pleasure to mould myself on his ways and wishes."

"It would have done him a deuced deal more good if he had moulded himself on yours," said Adair, abruptly.

"What a compliment!" she cried, again laughing, this time with unmixed amusement. "Believe me, I am a much wiser woman than I was. Now for another source, an inexhaustible source, of wisdom. I hear the children; they have just come in."

Adair heard a confusion of young voices in the hall. Mrs. Crichton rose and opened the door. "Come here, darlings," she said. A boy and a girl, one seven or eight, the other a couple of years younger, followed by a toddling rogue who was barely three, answered her call immediately.

"Oh, mother dear, Georgie was such a

naughty boy! there was a big dog came jumping and barking at the p'ram; and Georgie went to strike him with his hoop-stick. Nurse said he might—the dog might —have torn him to pieces!" cried the girl, a pretty flaxen-haired child with big, dark, wondering eyes and a sweetly curved mouth like her mother's.

"I was afraid he would hurt baby," said George, coloring.

"And you tried to beat him off? That was a brave little chap," cried Adair. "Come and sit on my knee. You ought to be a sailor."

Georgie, after a minute's hesitation, accepted the offer of a seat, and replied, with a serious air,—

"No; I would rather be a groom than a sailor."

"No, Winnie dear," said Mrs. Crichton, lifting her on her knee and taking off her hat, "Georgie must not quarrel with big barking dogs; but he was not naughty: he tried to take care of baby."

Here Nurse, a very important-looking elderly person, observed that Master George was quite too venturesome.

"Go and kiss that gentleman," said Mrs.

Crichton. "He used to play with mother when she was a little girl."

Winnie got down, her mother passing her fingers lovingly through the child's long hair as she moved away to Adair to displace her brother. She looked very searchingly at him after holding up her mouth for the prescribed kiss, and then asked,—

"Are you as old as mother?"

"I am just two years older."

"That is like Winnie and me," said Georgie, who was contemplating them. "Yet Winnie never will do nothing I tell her."

"Of course not," said Adair, laughing. "I assure you *I* always did everything your mother told me."

Here baby, who had scrambled on his mother's knee, perceived biscuits and bread-and-butter on the table, and began to scream for them.

"He'll not eat a morsel at his tea if you give him those, 'm," said Nurse.

"Babs shall have biscuits for himself at tea," temporized the mother.

"Give him to me," asked Adair. "What a jolly little chap!"

Baby looked at him solemnly for a mo-

ment, and then slapped his face with all his might.

"Oh, you rude boy!" cried Winnie, scandalized.

"Doesn't like to be taken liberties with, eh?" said Adair, laughing, and giving him back to his nurse, towards whom he was struggling with arms and legs.

"He hasn't had time to learn manners yet, sir," remarked that functionary, and disappeared with her charge.

The two elder children remained for a short time, Winnie contenting herself on Adair's knee, examining the charms which hung to his watch-chain, and putting many questions to her new acquaintance, while George rummaged about the room, asking for this and upsetting that. At last he lifted a solid-looking book.

"Take care, Georgie," cried his mother; "that is father's book and his mark is in it."

The boy instantly replaced it, and turned away with a celerity that struck Adair. "Father," he thought, "is a terror to evil-doers."

"Are you going to live with us?" asked Winnie.

"No such luck, Winnie. I am an unlucky beggar without a home."

Winnie cuddled close to him, pressing her curly head against his chest.

"Mother dear, let him live with us," she cried, appealingly.

"Mr. Adair's own mother will be coming to live with him soon," said Mrs. Crichton, smiling.

"Have you a mother?" asked the child, incredulously. "Old people don't often have mothers, do they?"

"Anyway, father wouldn't let him stay here. He doesn't like people," cried George.

"Oh, he likes Mr. Adair," returned his mother. "He wants him to come and dine here."

"Do, do, do come!" exclaimed Winnie, who had evidently taken a sudden fancy to Adair. "I will show you my best big dolly. It has nice fair hair like mine."

"Then it must be charming."

Here the under-nurse came in to say that tea was quite ready.

"You must go, dears," said Mrs. Crichton.

"Oh, I am so hungry!" cried George, and scampered off without saying good-by.

Winnie, also in haste, clasped her arms round Adair's neck, and kissed him heartily, then bestowed a rapid hug on her mother, and was gone.

"What jolly little darlings!" exclaimed Adair. "Nice children are enchanting."

"They are profoundly interesting," she returned, with a slight sigh, "but don't fancy they are an unmixed pleasure: they are so streaked with good and evil, it is a revelation to live with them. I suppose I see this so clearly because I am not naturally a maternal woman."

"Not maternal!" cried Adair, astonished. "Why, you seem wrapped up in them. And how they love and cling to you!"

"God knows I love them," she said, with a thoughtful, far-away look in her eyes, "but I haven't that feeling of personal possession in them that some women enjoy—I suppose it is enjoyment. They are quite separate entities—little individuals—to me. I fancy the older they grow the greater pleasure they will give me—if they do not give me pain."

"I should not have thought you would admit such a doubt," cried Adair.

"Ah! I doubt so much!"

He looked earnestly into her eyes, while he thought, "She is not happy: happiness does not doubt."

There was a brief pause; then Mrs. Crichton, speaking with a slight effort and in a changed tone, said, "You remember my sister? She was very pleased to hear of you. I was with her this morning." Then, with some slight hesitation, "If you have the time to spare, I should be so glad to take you round to see her. She lives quite near; and she has such a dull, sad life."

"Yes, of course. I shall be delighted. I have plenty of time."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Crichton. She did not add another word, but she let her eyes speak to his. What a world of sorrowful gratitude he read in them!

"It is fortunate that I am free this evening," she resumed. "Mr. Crichton dines out with some friends, and does not return to dress, so I shall divide my evening between my sister and the children. I shall just guide you to her house and introduce you; then, if you will stay a little while and talk over old times——"

"It will be a pleasure to me," Adair interrupted.

"I shall not keep you long," she returned, and left the room. She was soon back, and wore the same black lace bonnet, the same dark silk mantle, which he had noticed the day before. It gave him a curious thrill of pain to recognize them. She said, "I am ready," and they left the house together.

After reaching the Bayswater Road they followed it for a few paces, and then turned down a narrow lane or street of very small houses with diminutive gardens adorned by somewhat blackened old poplars. The street was neat and well kept: it was evidently a relic of the days when Bayswater was a country place entitled "Myrtle Grove."

"I must not forget to fix what day you can dine with us," said Mrs. Crichton.

"Pray consult your own engagements, Mrs. Crichton."

"Oh, we have very few. Don't imagine we lead a gay London life. Will Wednesday next suit you?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Do you know Mayne, the explorer, who made that journey through Thibet people talked about some years ago?"

"No, I have never met him."

"He is a friend of Mr. Crichton's, and

rather amusing, considering the solemnity of his book. I will try and get him to come. I don't want a big dinner: they are generally so dull. I was rather lucky last night in having Mr. Langley for a neighbor. He is a very clever barrister, and a little good talk does brighten one up wonderfully."

Here they paused at a neat little abode. Mrs. Crichton smiled and kissed her hand to some one in the window whom Adair did not see, because he was looking at his companion.

A small servant-girl opened the door and ushered them into a front parlor, where a very slight, almost attenuated woman lay on a sofa drawn up to the window. Her eager dark eyes seemed too large for the pale, thin face they illuminated; her thin gray hair was neatly braided under a pretty little lace cap, and a bright-colored eider-down coverlet lay upon her feet. She held a piece of knitting and a pair of large wooden needles. The room looked comfortable and cheerful with spring flowers; a small fire glowed in the grate, and, though the furniture was common enough, there was a touch of good taste in all the arrangements. The folding doors between the front and back rooms, always

hideous, were concealed by portières of gay-flowered chintz, prettily draped.

"I have brought our old friend Norman Adair to see you, dear," said Mrs. Crichton as she entered the room.

"He is very good to let himself be brought," returned Miss Hill, holding out her hand. "It is many a long day since I saw an old friend."

"I am very glad to have an opportunity of coming," returned Adair, taking her hand warmly, and feeling himself a lumbering monster in that tiny room beside so fragile a creature as the invalid.

"We have all seen a good many changes since we last met. I am glad to find yours have been for the better."

"Thank you,—yes, considerably for the better; and Mrs. Crichton, too. I have had the pleasure of meeting her husband and making the acquaintance of those jolly little children of hers."

"Oh," ejaculated Miss Hill, "I suppose your husband *is* all right, Constance? I don't exactly remember when I last saw him."

"You know, dear Mary, he is greatly occupied, and it is late when he reaches

home,—much too late to see you," urged Mrs. Crichton, gently.

"Oh, yes, I quite understand," said her sister, in a peculiar tone. "The children are fine healthy little creatures; at least they are strong enough, if restlessness is any sign of strength. The little girl is rather sweet. I don't care much for the boys."

"There is a candid and impartial aunt for you," said Mrs. Crichton, smiling. "Now I shall leave Norman with you, and return when the little ones are safe in bed: we are going to have an orgy of puzzles and picture-books and stories, as I shall be alone this evening." She stooped to draw her sister's coverlet a little higher, murmuring something to her as she did so. Then she shook hands with Adair, told him not to forget his engagement for the following Wednesday, and departed.

The invalid watched her through the window as she opened the garden gate, and Adair noticed the softening of her keen eyes as she gazed; then, with a quick sigh, she turned to him and exclaimed, "She is changed too!"

"Yes; she has developed into a more charming woman than I expected; or rather

I was too ignorant, too unlicked a cub to expect anything," said Adair, with a good-humored smile.

There was a brief pause; then Miss Hill began an exhaustive cross-examination of her visitor, respecting his mother, his sister, his own career and future plans. She was a shrewd, clever woman, narrowed by the physical limits of her curtailed existence, but strong and enduring. There was nearly ten years' difference between her and her younger sister, and more than twenty in appearance. Hers was a rocky nature, but, given the wand of affection and gratitude to strike it, living waters of truth and tenderness could be evoked from its stony depths.

"From the time your mother left Altringham," Miss Hill resumed, after a pause, "we lost sight of her. My father died about two years and a half after: of course we had to turn out. The nearest sphere of action, a sphere about as big as a marble, was the county town; and we spent nearly three years there. Then Constance met Mr. Crichton, and after six months they married, and we have all been in London since."

"And do you like being in London?" asked Adair.

"Like!" echoed his interlocutor. "How can I like one place more than another? My world is within four walls. Had I the power of moving about, I fancy I should prefer London to any other dwelling-place."

"At any rate," said Adair, seeking anxiously for some consolatory topic, "it must be a comfort to you that your sister is comfortably settled: I fancy Mr. Crichton is well off and—prudent."

"Prudent! Oh, he is uncommonly prudent; but I don't suppose I should have liked my sister's husband whatever he was. Indeed, I never could understand why she fell in love with him."

"And she did fall in love with him?"

"She did. There could be no mistake about it."

"I am quite sure," cried Adair, "she would never have married a man she did not love."

"Don't be too sure, then. I've known sweet good women driven into matrimony with mere monkeys of men by the whips of poverty."

"Ah, you cannot call Mr. Crichton a monkey," returned Adair, laughing: "he is a very good-looking fellow."

"He is," said Miss Hill, with complete agreement. "So I thought too."

Adair soon after stood up to say good-by. "I think I shall be some time longer in town," he said; "and, if you will allow me, I shall come and see you sometimes."

"Allow you!" she exclaimed, with a pleasant laugh which reminded him of her sister's. "My dear boy, you know very well it is bestowing a favor to give half an hour to a miserable recluse like myself. If I had the use of my limbs and all my faculties, no one would love the world better than I. I think I am strong enough and honest enough not to cry sour grapes. Come as often as you can spare time for charity, and bring me the echoes of that wonderful, interesting, cruel world away from which fate has shunted me into a corner."

"You may depend on it, I will come, Miss Hill."

He walked briskly back to the Bayswater Road, and, turning, carefully took the bearings of Myrtle Grove before he went away to his hotel, his heart and imagination full of the pictures left on them by the last couple of hours. A sweeter picture had never been presented to either than that of

Mrs. Crichton and her fair children. Why was it that a curious, doubtful hope for her happiness remained with him, rather than a conviction of its certainty? That, and impatient calculation as to how soon he might call again, chiefly occupied his thoughts for the rest of the evening, although he went to the theatre with a merry party, relations of his friend young Vesey of the —th Light Dragoons, and was one of the merriest among them.

The next morning Adair had a note from Mrs. Crichton: "Pray do not think me tiresome. Mr. Crichton, who is very business-like in his ideas, insists that if I do not repeat my invitation in writing you will forget all about it: so pray remember Wednesday the 30th. My poor sister greatly enjoyed your visit, and if you have time to repeat it, it would be a real boon. You have made a deep impression on my little Winnie, who sends you a kiss."

A new world of interest, of curiosity, of conjecture, seemed to have suddenly opened for Adair, into which he plunged eagerly, without a thought of possible harm to himself or others. He possessed, on the whole, however, a fair share of common sense and

self-control; he therefore resisted his strong inclination to repeat his visits to Sutherland Gardens and Myrtle Grove, especially the latter. He could perceive that his old acquaintance Miss Hill did not love her brother-in-law, and felt sure that whatever her feelings she would not long keep them to herself. It would not be honorable on his part to obtain a key to the puzzle which interested him through this illegitimate channel. So he got over the time as best he could. But, in spite of the many means to be found in London to speed its flight, it did not fly quite as fast as he wished; and Wednesday seemed slow in coming. It came at last, however, and the hansom which took him to Bayswater punctually at the time appointed seemed the very slowest he had ever met with.

He was shown into the solemn drawing-room, which, being adorned with flowers, looked a little more cheerful, and was welcomed by Mrs. Crichton with kindly ease. She had her two elder children with her, and wore an Indian embroidered muslin over lilac, with lace and lilac ribbons gracefully disposed about it, and three narrow bands of lilac in classic fashion round her

graceful head. Winnie ran to meet and embrace him, but George offered a more sober greeting.

"Mr. Crichton is a little late," said his wife, "but he will be here directly."

"I fancy I am early," returned Adair, and he took Winnie on his knee. "Where is the beautiful dolly I was to see?" he asked.

"Pray do not ask," said Mrs. Crichton. "It has come to a sad end." Adair saw that Winnie's eyes were full of tears and her pretty little mouth quivered. "It was all an accident, and we do not want to annoy poor father by telling him about it."

"Shall I bring you another?" whispered Adair to his little friend,—"another as pretty?"

"Oh, yes, please; but"—with a deep sigh—"it won't be the old one."

"Try not to think of it, darling," said her mother.

Here Mr. Crichton entered and gave Adair a cordial welcome. His smile was frank and pleasant, but when in repose there was something grim and lowering about his brow and eyes. The children went to him frankly enough, and he seemed exceedingly

fond of them, ready to tell little anecdotes of their cleverness and to betray other symptoms of paternal weakness.

The other guests now arrived quickly. There was a majority of men, there being but two ladies besides the hostess,—one a pretty, meek, silent young wife, who came with a somewhat bumptious husband, the other a very chatty, much travelled, well-preserved widow, who was gorgeously arrayed and quite appropriated Mr. Crichton.

The celebrated traveller came at last; and Adair was made happy by taking Mrs. Crichton down to dinner. The repast itself was simple, but perfect, ending, Indian fashion, with a curry of the highest merit. The conversation was general and rather above the average, and Adair admired the unobtrusive tact with which Mrs. Crichton led it, while a certain good-humored *bonhomie* made her husband an excellent host. Once a sudden gleam of angry disgust flashed from his deep-set black eyes towards his wife, as he said to the traveller, who was about to help himself to an *entrée*, "Don't touch that, Mayne: it isn't fit to eat."

"After all, it is a sort of thing any man

would say," thought Adair. "I am growing crotchety and fanciful."

When the ladies had left, though at first, in compliment to the traveller, the talk for some time was geographical, before long it took a stock-exchange turn, and Adair discovered that his host was greatly taken up with a scheme to build cheap marine villas at a newly instituted bathing-place on the Kentish coast. He listened with attention, an odd instinctive desire to establish friendly relations with his old friend's husband impelling him to affect a certain degree of interest.

"It's going to be a capital concern," said Mr. Crichton, pushing the very particular port towards him. "If you have a few stray hundreds, you could not do better than take shares."

"I should like to know more about it," said Adair.

"Look in at my office any day, and I'll explain the whole thing to you. Come—no, not to-morrow; that's pretty well bespoke—the day after, some time before one."

"Thank you; I will be sure to come." Adair left the room as soon as he could, ac-

companied by the explorer and a gray-haired epicurean bachelor who was considered quite a man of fashion in Bayswater circles.

The fair widow immediately captured Major Mayne, and Adair drew a seat beside his hostess.

"What happened to the doll?" he asked.

"Ah, that was a tragedy! Poor George has rather a violent temper, and quarrels with his sister, who often provokes him. Yesterday there seems to have been a scrimmage in the nursery, and George, by way of annoying Nurse, who was ironing poor Dolly's best frock, shook the table violently. Doll was lying on the floor where George had thrown her; the iron was near the edge; it was very hot; it fell on Dolly's lovely face, and you can imagine the rest. I don't think George intended to work such ruin, for he was quiet in a moment and cried heartily: so we say nothing about it, for Mr. Crichton is occasionally very severe."

"What a young Turk Master George must be! Now, Mrs. Crichton, I want to buy my little sweetheart a doll, and I daren't on my own judgment. Will you come and help me to choose one?"

"It is really too kind of you, Norman——"

"Kind to myself, yes."

"Suppose we take Winnie herself to choose?"

"By all means. But the boy: shall he stay behind?"

"I think he must, as he has been so naughty."

"Suppose I promise, if he keeps good a whole week, to take him?"

"Oh, it would bore you frightfully."

"No, I am never bored."

"You are a happy creature! Well, if you will be so good."

"All right. I'll come to-morrow, about three?"

"Both Winnie and her mother will be delighted."

After some further talk, during which Adair noticed that Mrs. Crichton's eyes turned somewhat uneasily from time to time towards the door, Mr. Maberly (the bachelor) approached to say that he was sure Mrs. Fairchild, the pretty young *mariée* aforesaid, sang delightfully: would Mrs. Crichton play an accompaniment?

"Certainly, if I can," she returned, rising

readily and going to the piano. A great turning over of music ensued, and at last a ballad was found which Mrs. Fairchild acknowledged she used to sing. She accordingly lifted up her voice, and went feebly through it, in a horrid fright, making more than one mistake, which her hostess masked as well as she could by the accompaniment.

While this was going on, the rest of the men came up-stairs. When it was over, and the widow was having some curiosities of Thibetan work explained to her by Mayne, a bright idea occurred to Adair, who had joined the group at the piano. "What a lot of pretty things you have about!" he said, picking up a quaint Japanese bronze. "I believe ladies are particularly fond of collecting these oddities,—especially if they are bargains,—and don't much care where they go for them. I remember a friend of my mother's used to find treasures, dirt-cheap, at the pawnbrokers' shops." He looked at his hostess as he spoke, and was annoyed to feel his own color rise.

Mrs. Crichton raised her eyes to his, with a slight expression of surprise. "I don't think I should ever buy at a pawnbroker's," she said, quietly. "Besides, I have no

taste for collecting. Mr. Crichton amuses himself in this way. All these are his purchases."

A sudden conviction seized on Adair's mind, as she spoke, that it was not to buy baubles she had sought that sordid shop in the Edgware Road.

Adair had no further opportunity of speaking with his hostess, though he outstayed his other guests. Mr. Crichton talked with him with cheerful friendliness and reminded him of his promise to call at the office.

"He doesn't seem a bad sort of fellow," thought Adair, as Crichton made some playful allusion to his wife as the commander-in-chief.

He had said good-night and left the room, when he suddenly remembered he had not asked the address of Mr. Crichton's office, and turned back to inquire it. Mrs. Crichton was standing by the fireplace, and the lights on the mantelpiece fell full upon her. She looked white and distressed, while from the other end of the room came the exclamation "Damned infernal carelessness!" in deep, thunderous tones, from her husband. The words were arrested for a moment on Adair's lips, and, when he did speak, both host and

hostess received him smilingly, and, having entered the address in his pocket-book, he went off, thinking it was bad style to be so furious about a servant's mistake, for of course it must have been of the servants Crichton was speaking. Could his old friend Constance Hill, who was such a charming tyrant in the by-gone days, have grown timid as a wife? Bright and gracious as she was, she had a guarded, watchful expression in her eyes,—except when alone with him.

The remembrance of her delightful frankness in their *tête-à-tête* interview gave him a curious thrill of mingled pleasure and apprehension,—apprehension that in the well and smoothly ordered family into which he had been so cordially welcomed "all was not gold that glittered."

CHAPTER III.

THIS was the beginning of a rapidly growing intimacy. Adair soon found he was due two or three times a week in Sutherland Gardens, where he was received with open arms by the children, with quiet content which made him feel delightfully at home by their mother, and with cordiality by the master of the house.

It was like having a home, a charming, restful home, though he still sought for the inner truth of his old playfellow's life. Frank as she seemed, there were discordant, contradictory touches in her scheme of thought, as she expressed it at times, which puzzled him and suggested to him that she rarely let herself go.

He often paid a visit to the invalid in Myrtle Grove, much to her enlivenment, but not exactly to his own satisfaction. Miss

Hill was by no means a querulous or complaining sufferer. She bore the many pains and deprivations attendant on spine disease with grim resolution rather than resignation. Her brain was still clear and active, and Adair soon found he could bring her no more acceptable gift than some new book treating of the social, political, or religious movements of the day, or of travels in out-of-the-way places and discoveries of ancient ruins.

These tastes, and a certain strain of cynicism,—the outcome, probably, of her misfortune,—rendered her rather difficult in the matter of acquaintances. The ordinary class of kindly, narrow, district-visiting elderly young ladies and serious-minded widows who delight in cosseting such invalids as Mary Hill bored her to death, and in their turn they shook their heads over her.

She enjoyed a talk with Norman Adair, and refrained from sneering at his bright, unphilosophic, optimist views. He, however, saw clearly after a few weeks that she was a difficult charge to her sister, who bore her fretfulness and short temper with angelic patience.

Yet at times Adair could see the profound

love and tenderness which spoke in her eyes when they rested on Constance.

"Another supply of flowers, Norman!" she exclaimed, with a well-pleased smile, one fine afternoon towards the end of May, as he entered the little sitting-room in Myrtle Grove. "It is a new thing for me to have a smart young man presenting me with lovely blossoms. I delight in them. Ring, please. I will get my little handmaid to fill the vases." And she bent her head to inhale the perfume of Adair's welcome offering.

"Well, what news have you for me from the world?"

"Nothing very new," returned Adair, who looked more thoughtful and perhaps less joyous than when we first saw him. "I had a long letter from my mother this morning. They are going to the Italian lakes, and they want me to join them."

"Shall you?"

"Not yet. I find London very fascinating. Besides, I have business which will keep me——"

"That business of yours is remarkably elastic. When I first saw you, two months ago, you hoped it would be finished in three

weeks. I suppose you'll not be afloat this year?"

"No; I don't think so. I hear there is a place to be sold in my father's part of Galloway (you know he was Scotch), and I am going to have a look at it."

"You lucky boy! What a power money is! Yet rich people are generally odious: even you will grow disagreeable by and by, and then you must not come near me."

"What a terrible prophecy!" cried Adair, laughing. "There are exceptions to this rule, and I hope I shall be one. Your sister, now,—she is rich, and I am sure *she* is not odious."

"Rich! Constance?" in a high key. "She is the veriest pauper. Being married to a rich man only emphasizes a woman's poverty."

"Come, Miss Hill; a woman must share the good things of her husband's life. I am sure I should not like to think my wife wanted anything I could give her."

"No, I dare say not just at present. Wait,—wait till familiarity with wealth eats into your nature and subdues it: then you will look out for a wife with a lot of money, and

then she will be welcome to whatever she can buy for herself."

"Oh, believe me, If she is not fair to me, What care I how rich she be?" said Adair, smiling.

Miss Hill looked at him rather indulgently, thinking what a fine-looking, though not handsome, man her old friend had grown, and what a good, honest, resolute face he had.

"But I am making myself disagreeable," she said. "I have been put out this morning. Constance sent my nephew George here with a message: she can't come to me; she has to copy papers or something for Mr. Crichton. I don't like that boy."

"He is a jolly little chap, though, and very like his father."

"He is," she returned, with intense acquiescence. "The other two are not, thank God!"

"Poor Crichton is in the back of your books, then?" said Adair, lightly.

Miss Hill paused an instant, and then said, quietly and distinctly,—

"I hate him. He has destroyed what little was left me of life."

Adair was startled, and felt the awkward-

ness which always attends the discussion or avowal of family differences.

"Of course your sister was a great loss to you," he said, opening a way of escape if Miss Hill chose to give an amiable turn to her observations; "but, after all, a good marriage——"

"I don't, on the whole, object to marriage," she interrupted. "If she had married a man like you,—like what you are now,—I should not have felt it; but that man Crichton hates and despises me,—poverty is the one unpardonable sin in his eyes; and he is jealous of me, because his wife loves me. Nothing can change that. She is well named. Constancy is her special gift. I suppose she finds him all right; at least she never complains to me; but her high frank courage is all gone. Even with me she thinks before she speaks. What she ever saw in the man to love I don't know, but she did love him well. He wasn't so bad in those days. Oh, no: he had still something to gain. He used to be nice to me. He would see that I never wanted for anything. Well, nor have I; but my own pittance pays for a good deal. He does add something, of course, or I could not get on;

but then he robbed me of my beloved bread-winner. Ah, I have let myself go; but you will not betray me. Norman, *do* you think she is happy? Can she be happy with such a mammon-worshipper? He likes *you* because you are rich,—because you are an old friend who does credit to his wife and vouches in a way for her original position. I am a poor creature, a beggar and a disgrace. Do you know, it is two years since I beheld my brother-in-law! Can Constance be happy with a husband like that?"

"Good God! you surprise and pain me! Yes, I have always thought her happy: I believe she is. A man may be peculiar, yet not a bad husband. He is quick-tempered——"

"Quick!" she interrupted. "If you will not be shocked at such a word on the lips of an invalid who ought to be 'making her soul,' as the Irish say, he has an infernal temper,—uncertain, treacherous, unreasonable. There, I am false to Constance, running on in this way; and I am disappointed in her, too: she is afraid of that man,—her inferior. Now I will not say another word on this subject,—never again. Forget it all, Norman; bury it out of sight."

"I cannot quite forget, but I will bury it, and try to think less bitterly. Crichton is a very busy man: he——"

"No excuses. I will never change *my* ideas. What have you there, Jumbo?" (this to the diminutive servant who came in with a basket of splendid strawberries).

"Please, 'm, they're from Mr. Andrews, the fruiterer, for you, mum."

"From Mrs. Crichton?"

"I dunno, 'm."

"I suspect I have to thank you, Norman, for these too."

"I saw some as I was passing near this, and went in to get them, but they were not quite fresh, and the man said he expected others: so I told him to send them in."

"You are an admirable young man, Norman," she said, with a sweet smile, that for the moment made her like her sister. "I love strawberries, and in a monotonous life such as mine one comes to think a good deal of what one eats and drinks. Unfortunately, there are so few things I like."

"Yes, that's unlucky. Then I must say good-by. I have paid you an unconscionably long visit."

"And done me a world of good. Come again when disposed to do a kind act."

Adair rearranged her cushions for her with kind, deft hands, and bade her adieu.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and he felt he must commune with himself uninterruptedly. His ideas had been confused, his views disturbed, of late, and the conversation he had just had had thrown fresh light on his own mental condition. He turned into Kensington Gardens and struck across them towards Hyde Park. The soft turf, the shade of the fine old trees, the pretty groups of children, —all was bright and pleasant, but Adair saw none of it. He was absorbed in the picture presented by his own imagination of the terrible life which he began to fear his new old friend led. His own observation in the few business transactions he had had with Crichton suggested that his love and greed for money amounted to a passion, and that there was a curious shiftiness about the man. Could he be cruel? If so, what a destiny for so charming a woman as Constance! and what would be the end thereof? How could she guard her children from the influence, perhaps the caprices, of such a father? Could it be possible that a woman of her

mental calibre (for she had more than the ordinary amount of brain-power) was afraid of a man who was certainly her inferior? Her sister no doubt exaggerated things, but the idea had occurred to him before she had suggested it. Why, such a terrorized existence must be a hell upon earth. A wild fury rose in his heart against the brute who could thus trample upon such a beautiful nature. He felt he could crush out his worthless existence without the smallest hesitation. And then how clearly he saw her, the rich grace of her rounded figure, the sweet mouth, the eyes, the fine thoughtful eyes, that could laugh with so keen an appreciation of humor, or dwell on her children with such infinite tenderness, or shelter themselves behind a certain cautious quiet that defied penetration! What a woman to have beside you all the days of your life, and to love you as she could and would love a true-hearted husband! What right had such a man as Crichton to a noble, adorable companion like Constance? Then the full light pierced to Adair's soul in spite of the curtains of plausibility in which he had wrapped it, and he exclaimed, half aloud,—

"This is a pretty pass for an honest gen-

tleman, as I hoped I was, to be fathoms deep in love with another man's wife! but I am; and I'd rather bear all, all I can see before me, than forego the delight of it to be with her, to hear her speak, to feel, as I do in some unaccountable way, that she trusts me. Perhaps I may be of use to her some day," he continued to muse as he unconsciously slackened his pace. "She has no brother, no near relative. I might act a brother's part,—though with infinite caution. Whatever suffering comes of it, it will be to me only. She has no thought of me,—of any one; she is loyalty itself to her husband; she has no room in her heart save for her children. I would never offend her by look or word. I will be her true, devoted friend, but I will gratify my own heart by loving her with all my soul and with all my strength." He walked on for some little way, absorbed in a heavenly vision of the woman who had utterly fascinated him and struck to the hitherto untouched depths of his inner life, maturing and developing with sudden electric power the slumbering forces of his more serious manhood. He was glad he had not had any temptation to go to sea again. Indeed, he now knew he would not

have gone. But he would hereafter; he was not going to fritter away his life in ease and idleness; but he must ascertain how matters stood with Constance, and in what way he could serve her, before he left England. Then it would be wiser to go. These meditations brought him to St. James's Park. As he passed by the mounted sentries at the Horse Guards, to his great surprise and annoyance he ran up against Mr. Crichton, who was evidently in deep reflection. "What a bad countenance the fellow has!" was the thought that flashed through Adair's brain as his eyes fell upon him.

"Halloo, Crichton!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing so far west?"

"What! Adair?" he returned, with the smile which changed his face so wonderfully. "I have been trespassing on your ground. I have been interviewing some of the people at the Admiralty."

"Indeed! Have they offered you the command of the Channel fleet?"

"No,—a much better offer for my purposes: they want me to send out a cargo of provisions to the troops in China; and I don't think I'll make a bad thing of it. By the way, would you care to go to the Man-

sion-House ball to-morrow night? It is to be an extra fine affair."

"Thank you. I don't think I should know any one there."

"Mrs. Crichton and I are going."

"Oh! I thought you had declined."

"Well, we had, but I met Black this morning (he is the Lord Mayor, you know), and he seemed anxious we should go. Very polite of him: so I promised we should. I am on my way home now to tell my wife. I say, Adair, no time for a new dress, eh?"

"Don't be too sure: there's such a thing as milliners' magic."

"I don't think they could manage it. By the bye, you know we are going to the country on Saturday?"

Adair nodded.

"I've found an old-fashioned little place, near Welwyn, on the Great Northern Line. You must come and see us there: pretty country, nice drives and walks, good air. Shall I send you a card for to-morrow night?"

"I should be very glad to go, if I am to meet you: you'll look after me in the Land of the Stranger."

Crichton laughed, and said good-by.

Adair went on his way. He had heard about this ball, and remembered that Mrs. Crichton was very glad to have escaped it. She was busy preparing for their move to the country, and seemed to enjoy the prospect of the *villeggiatura*. He was sorry to think she should be troubled and wearied dressing and going to this festivity, merely because her husband's vanity was tickled by a personal invitation from the chief magistrate himself.

Before he reached the rooms where he had established himself, he made up his mind to pay an early visit to Sutherland Gardens the following day, a vague impression growing on him that he might be of use to Mrs. Crichton. If—if he could but serve her!

The next morning, however, he had himself an early visitor, an old messmate who happened to be passing through town. They had much to say to each other, and, though longing to get rid of him, Adair did not like to be uncivil: it was therefore half-past two before he reached his destination.

"Yes, sir, Mrs. Crichton is at home; but she is not very well, and said she would not see any one."

A curious sense that there was something

seriously wrong made him exceedingly reluctant to accept this denial. Perhaps if she was in any trouble Constance might confide in him.

"Pray take my card. Possibly Mrs. Crichton might admit me."

"Certainly, sir. Pray walk in." And he was ushered into the morning room which had grown to be his elysium.

He paced restlessly to and fro, feeling unreasonably disturbed. Soon the servant returned, to say Mrs. Crichton was coming down to see him. Then he stood still, waiting.

In a few minutes she came. He never forgot any detail of her dress, of her aspect, that day. She wore a loose morning gown of lilac and white, the long folds of which made her look very tall; her hair was looser than usual, as if she had not cared to dress it; and her face was very white. But her eyes struck him most of all; there was a strained, terrified look in them that set his heart beating with a wild desire to carry her away from all sorrow and fear and trouble.

"It is good of you to come so soon again," she began, in a measured tone, as if

she was carefully controlling her voice, and with a sort of sad smile.

"You are not well," he returned, taking the hand she offered, and shocked to find how burning and unsteady it felt. "You are not fit to go to this ball to-night." He looked earnestly into her eyes as he spoke.

"Oh, yes, I am; the doctor says I am. Mr. Crichton was rather put out this morning about my being unwell, so he went round to our doctor, who, unfortunately, lives close by, and brought him back to see me, and he says there is nothing the matter with me,—nothing!" And she laughed.

Her laugh decided Adair. "Look here, Constance—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Crichton: there's something very wrong with you. Can I not help you? Fancy I am your next of kin for the present. I wish I were!"

"So do I! Oh, so do I!" She drew her hand over her brow, and then rested the tips of her long white fingers on the table and paused. "Have you ever been in Nuremberg, Norman," she asked, turning her eyes away from his, "and seen the terrible Iron Maiden there?—a woman's figure that opens, and when the unfortunate victim was put inside, the doors, which are studded

with long spikes, closed upon him, and he was left to die. Perhaps the worst part of the punishment was that the whole night before, the criminal was obliged to kneel in contemplation of the figure in which he was to be entombed. Norman," she exclaimed, in a different tone, and clasping her hands together, "I have been kneeling in contemplation of my supreme moment of torture all last night and all this day. I am such a despicable coward!"

"Just tell me what I can do," said Adair, briefly, afraid to trust himself with speech.

"I will! I will!" She unconsciously grasped his wrist. "I am going to be—oh, so mean and unprincipled, you will despise me; but I *must* ask you. Perhaps some day you will understand why I am in this desperate strait. No, do not look at me, Norman. I only want money, a great deal of money, and at once,—immediately."

"How much?" He held his arm steady, and did not attempt to clasp her poor, tremulous hands.

"More than two hundred pounds. I will tell you why."

"No, it is not necessary. All I want is

to relieve you from this awful state of distress."

"But you must do more for me, Norman, than give me money, and I must explain. I—I have pawned my jewels, my necklace that my husband values so much, and you—that is, will you get them for me?"

"Yes, certainly; but we must be quick."

"You have saved me, Norman!" she exclaimed, pressing her hand upon her heart, and then again grasping his wrist with an expressive shrinking almost against him. "I am so awfully afraid of my husband: he is so fierce,—so strong." And her fingers pressed upon his throbbing pulse with more force than he had thought they possessed.

"Good God!" cried Adair, his eyes aflame, "what do *you* know of his strength?"

"No, no! of course nothing! It is my own miserable cowardly imagination. If I had been stronger and braver I should never have made the mistakes I did, and——"

"But he loves you? he must love you?" interrupted Adair.

"Yes, yes, sometimes, in his way." A wave of color passed over her face, and a slight shudder as of loathing quivered through

her frame. She slowly relaxed her hold, and, heaving a deep sigh of relief, said,—

"But I shall do better now, now you have set me free. Oh, Norman, do you understand that I can never repay you?—that I am begging this great sum from you as alms? Oh, how shameful it is!"

"No, it is not. I am one of your oldest friends. I am well off. I throw away far larger sums for mere self-indulgence. To have done this will always be a source of pleasure to me: to help you in any way is all I ask. I swear to be your faithful friend and brother. Now, there is no time to be lost. I must go to my bank in the Strand."

"And I will bring you the tickets which you must show, if you will be so very good as to do this for me."

"Yes, of course. Go, dear Mrs. Crichton, bring me those things."

She went swiftly away. Adair stood quite still, in deep and painful thought. This tender, delicate, beloved woman was in truth beyond his reach. What was the utmost he could do for her?—merely purchase here or there a few minutes' reprieve from the continuous torture of her life. She

was hopelessly entangled in a mesh the threads of which no knife of human workmanship could sever. And in the coming years would her children bring her more of pleasure or of pain? It was a very open question. His heart bled for her, and he thanked Heaven he had acted on the presentiment which urged him to call upon her that day. Had he not come to her in her hour of need, she would never have sent for him. But she interrupted his musing, and gave him the tickets she brought, adding a few words descriptive of the jewels, and the address where he would find them.

"Piccadilly? That's all right. My bank is in Pall Mall."

"You'll come back as quickly as you can?"

"Trust me." He was going, when he paused. "Any chance of Crichton returning before me?" he asked.

"It is impossible to say," she returned, the color which came back to her cheek fading so swiftly that he feared she would faint.

"For God's sake don't lose heart," he exclaimed. "I'll manage it. Before I come in I'll ask for him: if he is at home I'll pay

a short visit and go on to Miss Hill's, where you will find your things."

"Ah, yes! Well thought, dear Norman! But I do hope there will be no need: Mary has no idea of my transactions: she would be shocked and distressed."

"How the deuce does she imagine you are to manage, then?" cried Adair, impatiently. "But I'm off. You shall see me back again before five-thirty, if I have any luck."

What words could describe that waiting? Every sound of the bell, the pause of a tradesman's cart at the entrance or of a visitor's carriage next door, the tread of a passer-by who seemed to linger at the steps, the foot of the distributor of circulars who mounted them to thrust his announcement into the letter-box,—each set her heart beating, her nerves thrilling. It seemed to her that now she was on the verge of deliverance the danger of discovery was tenfold greater than it had ever been. What ages seemed crowded into the bare three hours he had been away! And at last when he came she could hardly utter a word; dark shadows lay below her eyes and bespoke exhaustion both of mind and of body.

Adair came in empty-handed. "Oh, it is all right!" he exclaimed, in reply to her eager eyes; "only I would not bring the things in till I was sure the coast was clear. Now I'll get them and dismiss the cab,"—which he proceeded to do, and Mrs. Crichton strove to recover herself, while she breathed a thanksgiving for this great deliverance.

"Just look through the cases and see that they are right," said Adair, putting them on the table before her.

"I will, but in my own room. It is getting late." She gathered them together and ran up-stairs with them.

She returned quickly. "They are quite right," she said, and stopped; then, clasping her hands together and holding them out, she almost whispered, "I think you have saved my life, Norman! I dare not think of what might have been——"

"Do *not* think of it," he said, and took her hands in both his own for a moment. "But promise me one favor."

"Yes, willingly," she said, without an instant's hesitation.

"You may," he returned, with a certain sad dignity. "You may safely promise any-

thing I ask. It is, never again to run so great a risk. Always remember that all I possess is at your service. Now I had better disappear. We'll meet at the ball."

That evening, as Mrs. Crichton was nearly ready, her husband came into her dressing-room. "Mind you put on *all* your jewels to-night," he said. "You won't be such a blaze as some of them, but you've a sprinkling of deuced fine stones, I can tell you."

"I cannot put on quite all I have," said his wife, smiling. "It would be rather a jumble." And she drew her jewel-case towards her.

"Are they all there?" he asked, with a curious gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, except what I have just taken off."

Mr. Crichton drew a chair, and began deliberately to examine the contents of the case, with which he seemed satisfied.

"It is an infernal nuisance your having had that headache this morning," he said, rising. "You look pale and washed out. By George! you were so queer and fidgety, you put some strange notions into my head."

"It was a nervous headache. I have had

one or two lately," she replied, with a sigh. "I have had a good deal to do and to think of."

"Lord's sake, don't set up nerves!" he exclaimed. "What on earth *have* you to do, but to sit here all day and have everything found for you?—I say, Sarah," to the maid, who came in at that moment, "haven't you a rouge-pot anywhere about? Your missis looks as white as a ghost." And, laughing harshly, he went away.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEW days after the ball the Crichtons left town for their summer quarters, and for nearly a fortnight Adair received no communication from Mrs. Crichton. However, he often heard of her and the children from Miss Hill, to whom he paid frequent visits. Apart from the reflected interest she possessed for him, he liked to talk with her. She was shrewd and far-seeing, in spite of some crotchets and rather strong prejudices. Her heart was full of her sister, who had been as a daughter to her, though the difference in their years was not nearly so great as it seemed. But, though willing to talk about Constance and the children as much as ever Adair liked, she never again mentioned her brother-in-law.

One morning early in June, Adair sat reading the paper after breakfast, in an exceedingly restless and dissatisfied state of

mind. He was sick of London, bored to death with dinners, nauseated with balls, teas, receptions, and all social usages, yet anchored to the hot, dusty, noisy city by his intense desire to see Mrs. Crichton and receive from her lips the explanation he was longing to hear and he suspected she was anxious to give. He was burning to look on her face, to hear her voice. How was he to live through his life without her? And yet he was capable of thanking God that she did not give him a thought that might not at most be bestowed upon a sympathetic brother or a useful friend. How was he ever to tear himself away from England, from the chance of being at hand to help her in any time of trouble? For she would be in trouble as long as her husband lived, "and he is as strong as a horse," mused Adair, throwing aside his paper and standing up, with the intention of going out,—when a telegram was handed to him: "Can you call here this afternoon? Reply." It was signed Crichton, and dated from his office.

Need it be said that Adair faithfully kept the appointment, in a state of burning curiosity as to the tidings which awaited him?

Crichton welcomed him effusively, but,

except a brief assurance that the wife and bairns were as "fit as fiddles," he did not mention them. His object in sending for Adair was to lay the project of another company before him and induce him to take shares and join the direction. Even to the sailor's inexperienced sense the affair seemed unsound, and he did not commit himself.

"Give me these papers and calculations. I'll study them a bit, and give you an answer in a day or two," he said. "I am keeping a few thousands free in case I meet with a chance of buying a 'residential property,' as the agents call it."

"What!" exclaimed Crichton, "throw away your money on land? Couldn't make a greater mistake. Land has had its day, I can tell you. Suppose you come down to our little cabin with me by the six-ten train, stay over Sunday, and study this matter in the quiet of the country. It's a pretty, fresh little place. The missis will be pleased to see you. We can't put you up, but there's a nice clean inn in the village, where they'll make you comfortable, not ten minutes from our place. Say yes, and I'll let you go; for I have fifty things to get through before I leave. Meet me at King's Cross, hey?"

"I shall be delighted, and thank you," returned Adair, wondering if Crichton could hear his heart, so strongly did it beat against his ribs.

So in a moment the meeting for which he had been pining was brought about.

It was a glorious evening when they reached the small station of Stanfield, where they found a somewhat battered, dusty, low phaeton and a rough, ungroomed, sturdy pony waiting for them. An equally ungroomed boy and Mr. Crichton's capriciously petted son and heir were in charge of the vehicle The child ran to kiss his father, and stood by him while he gave some directions to the porter; and Adair noticed that the little fellow stole watchful glances at Crichton's face, as if to ascertain what his mood was. But the father was in a temper as sunny as the skies, and tenderly embraced his boy. "I haven't a very stylish turnout, you see," he said, good-humoredly. "But we must have something to go to and from the trains: so I hired this trap with the house,—got the whole concern a bargain. You see, this place is quite out of the beat of summer visitors; heard of it by the merest chance," etc.: so he went on detail-

ing particulars of his agreement and chuckling over his own acuteness, while Adair feasted his eyes on the richly wooded undulating country, and the gray-green of the meadows now almost ripe for the scythe. "We'll stop and secure your room as we pass through the village," resumed Crichton, "and leave your bag."

"Oh," cried little George, "mother and me, we saw to all that as we came along; then she went back by the fields."

"Oh! all right. I'm glad she thought of it. I sent her a wire as soon as you left to-day. You see she has me under her thumb; dare not bring home a guest without giving due notice." And he laughed exultingly.

Leaving the village, they turned down a delightful green shady lane, which soon descended to a broad, shallow, clear stream, through which carriages drove, while foot-passengers were accommodated with a much-mended picturesque old timber foot-bridge. The opposite side rose rather steeply. The lower part of the slope was covered with soft, vividly green turf, bordered by shrubs and flowers, and crowned by a small old-fashioned cottage so covered with clematis

and roses that no one could see whether the walls were of brick or of stone.

"There's Riverhill," said Mr. Crichton, pointing to it with his whip.

"And there's mother and Winnie going to the gate," cried George. Adair had already caught sight of some white drapery fluttering among the trees. But the round-barrelled pony was now scrambling up the rough, stony, steep ascent from the ford, and soon stopped, standing sideways across the road, before a little green gate, at which stood Mrs. Crichton.

"Jump out," said Crichton. "I'll drive round to the farm-yard."

The next moment Adair held Mrs. Crichton's hand and was striving to steady his own. As their eyes met, she blushed deeply and her eyes sunk; but this tempting manifestation did not mislead Adair: it only filled him with regret that the sense of obligation to him should be painful to her. He covered the momentary awkwardness by catching up Winnie, who clamored for his notice, and bestowing sundry kisses on her bright face.

"I began to think I was never to see you again," he exclaimed, with his ordinary

frank cheerfulness, as they walked together to the house. "But I heard of you frequently from your sister."

"Yes; I am so grateful to you for going to see her. Poor dear thing, it is a sad time for her when I am away. I should love to have her down here, or anywhere in the country; but it is simply impossible." Here baby toddled out to meet them, and steadied himself by his mother's finger. "Don't my little gypsies look brown and well?"

"They do, indeed,—and you too. I am glad to see you have a touch of healthy bronze,—sun-kisses."

She raised her eyes to his with something of an effort.

"I am much—much better, thank *you*," she said, with some emphasis and a smile that conveyed to Adair a world of gratitude and trust. "The lawn is my drawing-room on fine days," she resumed; "it is a little dark in-doors." And she led the way to the farther side of the house, where there was a view over a more open country, with a distant line of misty blue hills. Here was a table on which were a work-basket, some books, and Winnie's doll, with several chairs, large and small.

Mrs. Crichton and her guest sat down, and fell into ordinary conversation about the invalid sister and Adair's own people. There was no further sign of embarrassment on her side, and she grew every minute calmer and more at ease. Yet it was different from their former intercourse. They had a secret between them unknown to her husband, and it seemed an indissoluble link binding them together. Moreover, it gave a secret meaning to every word that passed between them, a sense of union that separated them from all others.

Mr. Crichton soon joined them. He was in a contented frame of mind, and got through a very appetizing little dinner with scarce any fault-finding. He talked intelligently enough on Indian topics. Mrs. Crichton proposed coffee out of doors, to which her husband assented.

"Yes, it's a pretty country," he said, in reply to a remark of Adair's as they sat smoking their cigarettes in the delicious fragrant coolness of the summer evening. "Just the country for riding. But I don't keep horses now. In fact, a horse *and* a wife are too great a strain on ordinary re-

sources; and *I* chose a wife, the costlier thing of the two."

"How can you allow him to utter such blasphemy, Mrs. Crichton?" exclaimed Adair, looking keenly at her to see how she took her husband's polite speech.

"I cannot dispute its truth, you see," she said, quite placidly. "Moreover, you cannot sell a wife at Tattersall's if you wish to curtail your expenses."

"Exactly!" returned Crichton, with a laugh. "Never mind, Con: I don't want to sell you just yet."

The remark suggested a happy thought to Adair. "I have been tempted to buy a couple of horses," he said, "and now I scarcely know what to do with them, for my plans are all unsettled. Do you think I could find stabling for them here? And perhaps you would help me to exercise them. We might see a good bit of the country together.—You used to ride in former times, Mrs. Crichton," turning to her: "suppose you try again."

"Oh, no: I am afraid that rambling about on my poor old shaggy pony could hardly be considered riding," said Mrs. Crichton, with a pleasant, musical laugh.

"No, no: I don't fancy she could stick on now: somehow she seems to have lost all her nerve; and she used to be plucky enough."

Adair kept his eyes on the ground, and did not dare to raise them for a minute or two, knowing they might betray too much. "Well, we'll have a look at the inn stables," he said, "if you like the idea; and we might start a dog-cart for madam's benefit."

"Like the idea! Why, my dear fellow, it's first-rate! I should enjoy some riding beyond everything. I can't tell you how I missed my horses at first. But, by Jove, *you* must drive the dog-cart: driving I never did care for."

While he spoke, Mrs. Crichton rose and went softly away into the house.

Adair looked after her.

"Oh, never mind," said the husband. "She's gone to look at the youngsters,—always does. She's a deuced sight too fidgety about them: she's as weak as water, and gives them their own way."

"I never saw better-behaved children in my life," cried Adair.

"My good fellow, you don't live in the house with them."

The stabling proved good enough for Adair's purpose, and the horses were soon established in the village, much to Crichton's satisfaction,—rather too much, it seemed to his guest, for he contrived to stay away from business very frequently, and rode too many stone to be quite good for the steeds. Moreover, though Adair insisted on his riding them alternately, he was glad to let them rest when Crichton did go to town, and so his project of taking Mrs. Crichton out driving was defeated for some time. Then came a rush of business, and Crichton went to the city with tolerable regularity. But, in spite of all difficulties and every *contre-temps*, it was a heavenly time to Adair. There were hours of quiet intercourse, of unuttered sympathy, when the sense of his beloved companion's trust in him, of her reliance on him, lapped him in elysium. Yet a jury of the severest matrons might have listened without a frown to every word they said to each other. They were very seldom alone together. If Crichton was away the children were always there, —often the nurse.

"A telegram for you, ma'am," said the parlor-maid, whom they had brought with

them, coming from the house just as Mrs. Crichton and Adair began to conjecture that something must have detained Mr. Crichton.

"He is not coming to-night," she said, handing it to her companion.

"Will not return to-day. Letter by first post to-morrow," was all it said.

"I had no idea he had anything on hand likely to call him away," remarked Mrs. Crichton, thoughtfully.

"It seems to me he is not coming back to-morrow," observed Adair.

"No? Well, we shall know all in the morning."

And they proceeded to dine very cheerfully and happily. Winnie and George were allowed to sit up till it was quite dark, and Adair showed them how to play backgammon. Then he forced himself to leave his paradise earlier than usual, saying he would not come over next morning till after breakfast.

It behooved him to watch over her carefully. She was too innocent of evil to heed appearances, and her husband, careless and wrapped up in himself, would see nothing save his own pleasure and convenience until some accident roused his jealousy, and then he would be merciless. He lay long awake,

thinking of the life which lay before this woman who had entered into his soul and dwelt there; but this was nothing new to him now. Yes, she was in bondage from which nothing could liberate her, and her master, though nearly twenty years her senior, might live to any age, he was so strong, so careful.

Mrs. Crichton was established in her outdoor morning room, writing, when he joined her. "Mr. Crichton has gone to Glasgow," she said, as soon as they had exchanged greetings. "Something has gone wrong about his latest company: he is afraid some one is guilty of double-dealing: so he is gone, breathing out threatenings and slaughter."

"I wish he would stick to his regular business," said Adair, taking the newspaper, and throwing himself on the grass, where he could look up unobtrusively into the eyes he loved. "These by-ways of money-making so often lead to quagmires and shifting sands."

Mrs. Crichton finished addressing her letter, and leaned back in her chair without speaking for a moment; then she said, very gravely, as if to herself, "I am sometimes

frightened at my husband's eagerness to make money. It is like insanity." She shuddered. "You must have noticed it, Norman."

He nodded his head, anxious not to check by any words her inclination to speak out her thoughts.

"Yes, any one living with us must observe it; but no one really knows its full extent as I do. I fear, as it increases (and it does increase),—I fear the effect it may have on the children's future,—their education."

"But he is very well off?"

"Yes, I believe so. There is abundant internal evidence that he never spends more than half he might." And she smiled rather sadly. "Perhaps I ought not to speak in this strain; but, Norman, you are very safe, and I have been brooding in silence over so much that makes me uneasy that the relief of speaking out my fears to a safe sympathetic friend is too great a temptation."

"You know I am both," he said, in a low tone, not allowing his eyes to meet hers.

"Yes. I have never trusted any living soul since I was married. Mary is out of the question, for——" She stopped suddenly, and then resumed in a different tone:

"Do not join any more of Mr. Crichton's companies, Norman: you must not be robbed by the husband as well as the wife." She flushed crimson.

"Mrs. Crichton, you are unkind!" he exclaimed.

She did not seem to heed him. Clasping her hands, she went on in a low tone: "What would have become of me that day if you had not saved me? I tremble to think of it. He can be terrible; and he is so strong."

"My God! do you mean to say that—you have suffered from his strength?" cried Adair, white with an agony he could not hide.

"Oh, no, no! not that; he has never quite struck me; but I always fear—— And then, you know, he would have been in his rights. Think, if *your* wife had pawned her jewels, the jewels you had given her! Oh, Norman, it was too disgraceful!"

"That depends. I don't know why you did it."

She did not answer. There was a pause.

"They are all right now?" asked Adair.

"At present, quite right. Do you know

he—Mr. Crichton—has such an extraordinary prophetic instinct as regards anything that touches his property, his interest, that he seemed to divine why I was unwell—why I wanted to escape that ball? He turned over the whole contents of my—no, not *my*—of *his* jewel-case which he lends me." Adair muttered something. "Imagine, then, how I blessed you. But I am saying far more than I intended. I am ashamed of myself."

"For heaven's sake, snatch what relief you can, and never let yourself be in such a strait again. You know you need not," he said, meaningly. "Now I am not going to let you dwell on these painful topics, unless you want me to help you out of the lion's den."

"That I never shall, Norman: I must live and die in it."

"Then I propose that after luncheon we take a long drive by Knebworth, and let Winnie and George come. My groom will take care of one of them behind: he is a steady fellow. The country will look lovely after these last two showery days."

"Yes, thank you, Norman: it will revive me. How good and thoughtful you are!"

CHAPTER V.

THE barrier of reserve was now quite broken down, and, though Mrs. Crichton did her best to avoid the subject of her own difficulties and sufferings, bit by bit the picture of her married life was unrolled to Adair's eyes. Nor was she aware how vividly she painted it.

Left wretchedly poor at the death of their father, the sisters moved from the parsonage to the neighboring county town, where Constance eked out their small income by teaching in one of the "establishments for young ladies," which had at that date been converted into "colleges" or "high schools." Here she met Crichton, who was passing a few days with the family of one of her pupils. He was fascinated, and knew no rest till he had secured what, for the moment, seemed to him a pearl of great price.

Later the pearl seemed a trifle too costly. His air of disinterested generosity, the glamour of unconscious deceitfulness which enwraps a man dazed and blinded by fierce passion, overwhelmed Constance with a sense of gratitude, and the responsiveness naturally awakened by the exhibition of such ardent feeling made her fancy she loved in return. Had this ardor toned down, as, thank God, it often does, into kindly considerate friendship, she would have loved him warmly and well to their lives' end. But his nature forbade such a blessed result.

"No woman who is very poor ought to marry," she said, one day when they had been discussing an article in one of the graver magazines on French marriages. "She is perhaps felt to be less a burden by a poor man than by a rich one; she can do more to help in a humble *ménage* than in a grand one; still, she is a burden; and to wed a wealthy man when you have nothing is to become a life-long dependant. I shall never forget how I felt when George said, one day he wished to ride and had no horse, 'You see, Con, if you had brought some funds into the concern I should not have an empty stable.' I was overwhelmed with a

sense of misery and beggary I cannot describe. Of course that was just at first. Things do not affect me now in that way."

"Why did you not threaten to leave him?" cried Adair: "it would have brought him to his senses if you had shown that you knew your own value."

"But, unfortunately, I felt at the moment that my value was as nothing compared to that of a horse. And as to going away, where could I go? I had nothing I could call my own, and no relative or friend who would have helped me or taken my part. Then I hoped when Georgie was born things would go better; and they did, for a while. There were interludes of hope and peace; but they have grown shorter. It was these gleams of hope that destroyed me. Perhaps had I sooner recognized that I had to fight for my life I might have asserted myself. But I always wished to win him by fair means,—to influence him." She laughed, not at all bitterly. "As if any one could influence him who had no pedestal of gold to stand upon. So I sank lower and lower under his rule."

Later Adair gathered that on his marriage Crichton voluntarily promised his wife that

her sister should never want for any comfort. This promise she accepted readily, as in marrying she withdrew her own contributions to her sister's maintenance. What, then, was her dismay to find that the payments of the small quarterly sums he had suggested as an addition to the invalid's income were soon very reluctantly made, then irregularly, then the amount diminished on the plea of making it up next time,—which he usually failed to do!

This led to his wife's first difficulties. She was tempted to pay certain little debts incurred for her sister out of her housekeeping allowance. On telling her husband this as a reason for urging him to make good his shortcomings, she roused such a storm of threats of vengeance in the shape of a personal attack on the poor invalid that she never dared to be candid again, but went on, hoping against hope to save something from her allowance or to coax an occasional gift out of her lord and master when he was in a good humor,—an event which grew rarer each year. Thus Mrs. Crichton got into a tangle of difficulties, was tempted to try the fatal expedient of borrowing money, and was charmed to find with what

102717R

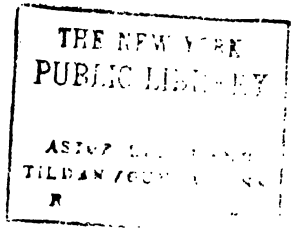
ease she procured it. Then came the awful necessity for repayment, with interest, and she was driven to pledge some of her jewels to put herself straight. So she got into a terrible groove, borrowing to make up deficits in the winter, pledging her jewels to pay when they went out of town for the summer, until her life was a continued terror, and every day made confession more and more impossible, and her sense of degradation more and more pitiable.

"I grew so accustomed to this system," she said to Adair one evening as they sat talking in-doors after the children had gone to bed, for it was chill and breezy, "that at any time I would take a brooch or a pair of ear-rings to exchange for a little ready money, rather than ask Mr. Crichton for it. I do think, Norman, his craze about money is insanity."

"What! used you to go all the way to Piccadilly?" asked Adair, shrewdly.

"Oh, no: for small transactions I went to a shabby little place in the Edgware Road. I wonder if you could ever realize what my sense of relief and safety is when I reflect that my jewels are safe and that I am clear of debt?" She stretched out her hand

"I would take a brooch to exchange for a little ready money."


THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR
TILDEN
R

frankly to Adair, who took and held it gently, loyally, for a moment, looking at her fair sweet face in wonder, as a vision of the long years of continuous torture which she had endured flashed across his brain.

"You were awfully weak!" he exclaimed; "but, my God! who could blame you? And you speak of this man without anger!"

"Oh, the period when I felt racking passions of indignation and despair has long gone by. Mr. Crichton is now a tremendous necessity to be reckoned with. And, Norman, a mother dares not despair. I must live on, and live with him, keeping the home as peaceful as I can, for the sake of my darlings. God knows how bitterly I regretted the birth of each; but, now they are in life, I give mine to them utterly. Perhaps the cruellest effect of all is the loss of my self-respect. Shall I ever win it back? But at least I have the courage of my cowardice, and will never attempt to leave my husband, because it would mean either parting from my children or separating them from their father; and he is fond of them now. His affection for them may yet humanize him, if their increasing cost does not displease him. Besides, I don't suppose I

could get a separation. He has never absolutely ill-treated me, and I have been fed, clothed, and lodged adequately. Oh, Norman! it is half-past nine. I have talked to you the whole evening of my hopeless troubles; and you are so patient. But, though it may bore you, it seems to lighten my load; and Mr. Crichton will be back on Saturday."

"You never tire or trouble me," said Adair, rising and pacing to and fro slowly. "I want you to give me a promise," he said, pausing opposite her and grasping the top of the chair on which he had been sitting. "Will you?"

"What is it?" she asked, with a smile.

"When you are in any difficulty or strait whatever, let me know. I ask nothing more than to help you."

"I earnestly pray I may never want help again, Norman. I will try not to. As it is, you have given me courage enough to speak seriously to Mr. Crichton about the allowance to my sister. I am determined to press for this."

"You ought," said Adair. "Be firm about this. Poor soul! it is cruel to curtail any pleasure or comfort she can enjoy. Why,

he cannot be human to torture any fellow-creature as he does you."

"Part of the torture he is unaware of," she said, thoughtfully. "I think, Norman, I shall take advantage of my brief freedom to run up and see my sister to-morrow. Mr. Crichton is not pleased when I spend a day 'out.'"

"Do. I will stay here as head-nurse in your absence and look after the youngsters."

She looked at him with suddenly awakened understanding as the idea dawned upon her of his tender care to guard her against misrepresentation.

"Thank you," she said, in a low voice, as a soft color slowly overspread her cheek. "You are a true friend."

"I think I may claim that title, Mrs. Crichton. Treat me as one. I shall feel honored."

"I will," she said, then paused, and repeated, "I will."

"Good-night, then. What train will you take to-morrow?"

"There's one at nine-thirty. I should like to catch it."

"All right. I'll be here by nine and drive you to the station."

The end of September saw the Crichtons settled for the winter in Sutherland Gardens.

Adair had forced himself to accept an invitation to Scotland, and another to Yorkshire, for shooting. He was nervously anxious to avoid rousing Crichton's or indeed any one's suspicions as to his own devotion to his old friend and playfellow. He realized how pitiless a man they had to deal with, and that any breach which could possibly come between Constance and her children would be death to her. He sometimes feared his own power over himself as time deepened and broadened the stream of passionate affection which welled up within his heart. But he underrated his own strength.

At last he permitted himself to return and call on Mr. Crichton at his office. He found that gentleman looking stern and gloomy and generally forbidding. However, he welcomed Adair cordially enough, and asked him to dinner the next day.

"Mrs. Crichton has not been very well," he said, in reply to Adair's inquiries. "The baby has been ailing, and his mother has been in a desponding mood about him, also about her sister, who is, she fancies, going

At last he permitted himself to call on Mr. Crichton at his office.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

to die. It would be a great release if she did. Whatever you do, Adair, don't marry a woman with an ailing sister."

"I don't think I should mind that, if I liked the woman," returned Adair, good-humoredly; and, gladly taking advantage of a clerk's entrance with a slip of paper, he added, "I see you are busy: so I'll post-pone the rest of my visit till dinner-time to-morrow."

"All right," replied Crichton. "It's my lawyer. His are golden moments, and, unfortunately, the gold comes out of my cash-box."

Adair's heart beat fast as he entered the familiar precincts of his beloved's home. He ventured to go rather early; and all the gloom and probable pain of the future, with its almost inevitable trials, were swallowed up in the unutterable joy of seeing her again, of feeling her soft hand in his, and of looking into her inscrutable lovely eyes,—for to him they were lovely.

She was alone, and trying to read by the fire-light, so he was not able to see her face very distinctly at first, but there was genuine pleasure in her voice as she exclaimed, "I am so glad to see you again!" He had to

collect his senses before he could answer with suitable composure.

"And you, Mrs. Crichton,—how have you been?"

She did not reply till the servant had lighted the lamps and had left the room; then he saw that she looked worn and thin, and that her eyes seemed too large for her face.

"I? I have not been quite well; but I cannot go into that now. Another time."

Adair bowed. "And the children: am I too late to see them?"

"Oh, no: they will be so glad."

She rang for the little ones, and they came eagerly, allowing of no talk save their own for half an hour, when Nurse marched them off to bed.

When they were left together, the silence remained unbroken for a minute; then Adair raised his eyes to hers and said, "Well?"

Her color rose slowly as she replied, "Not very well: though I have been trying to live up to the standard you set before me; but I will tell you the result later. Come and see me soon,—the day after to-morrow. Now tell me what you have been doing."

Adair complied, and they were talking merrily when Crichton came in.

He seemed brighter and more amiable than he was the day before. He talked freely enough to Adair, detailing how he managed to trace some underhand dealings of the secretary to one of his companies, and declaring his intention not to dabble in such concerns any more.

Adair observed that he did not take the slightest notice of his wife, who preserved her usual steady composure, though now and then he saw that she stole a watchful glance at her husband when he was looking away. There was a certain constraint over the trio, though Adair did his best to talk on all sorts of abstract topics and to be as animated as possible. Crichton, however, always came back to the City and the Stock Exchange.

At last, to Adair's relief, it was time to say good-night. Yet he felt, as he always did when parting with her, a desperate reluctance to leave Constance alone with her husband. Crichton had an ungovernable temper, and God only knew what tragedy might occur before Adair saw her again. Life was growing one long, feverish "waiting" to him.

Town was still empty,—it was the first week of October,—and Adair had therefore

fewer calls to make or engagements to break his constant brooding; but "time and the hour run through the darkest day," and once more he was at luncheon with Mrs. Crichton and her children, who were charmed to see their favorite playmate.

"They have grown since I saw them last, especially George," said Adair, as they rose from table.

"Oh, George is considerably advanced," said his mother, stroking his head and pressing it against her. "He goes to a preparatory school now nearly all day."

"Yes," said George, proudly, "it is ever so much better to have boys to play with."

"I remember thinking the same thing when I was a youngster. What barbarians boys are!" said Adair, laughing.

"They cannot help it," returned Mrs. Crichton, thoughtfully. "It has always seemed to me that there is no real sympathy between men and women.—Come, children, you must go out while the day is bright and warm: you can leave Georgie at school."

"Don't let them come to the door with me, mother," urged Georgie: "I can go quite well down the street alone."

"Very well," said his mother, smiling.

"Now tell me how it has been with you all these days," asked Adair, when they were safe in the comfortable morning room.

He leaned his shoulder against the end of the mantel-piece and looked down at her as she sat by her work-table embroidering a frock for baby.

"I have nothing new to tell," she said, without looking up from her work. "Things go on in the old way. I did make the effort I promised. I asked Mr. Crichton to fix a certain allowance for my sister, and to pay it regularly. I asked it quietly and reasonably; but oh, Norman, he made an awful scene!—worse than any hitherto. I was dreadfully frightened, but I kept a better front than I ever did before. Still, the strain since has been great. Of course he said a great deal that was fierce and cruel; but the next day when he was less excited I said that if he would not agree to that I must get her what was necessary out of the house allowance. He was not quite so wild then, but he swore a good deal, and, with a degree of composure which looked like earnest, said he would immediately change his will and leave his managing clerk, Phillips,—a man I particularly dislike,—executor and guardian to

the children, with a very small life-income to myself, as he would not leave his hard-earned money to be squandered on sickly beggars. Then my baby has been ill, and my poor Mary has had a terrible attack of pain. It is wonderfully good of you to come and see me; for I always have a catalogue of woes to detail."

She looked up to him with a slight smile, and, laying down her work, leaned back in her seat, dropping her right hand over the arm of the chair despondently.

"All that you have to tell has absorbing interest for me," said Adair. "I shall go and see your sister when I leave you. This threat about the will is serious. Now I remember, Mr. Crichton was engaged with his lawyer when I called on him the other day."

"I can do nothing," she returned: "and, oh, I am so dreadfully weary! There is no use in talking of my affairs. Tell me of your own. Have you made up your mind as to your future? When do you intend to go to sea?"

"I don't know. I cannot leave England at present."

"But you love your profession, Norman,

and I don't think you would be happy as an idle gentleman."

"I do not think of happiness!" he exclaimed, beginning to pace to and fro restlessly; "but, Mrs. Crichton, I cannot—I cannot leave you unprotected, unaided, to the misery and danger of your life. I will not!"

"Norman," she returned, after a brief pause, for his voice as well as his words was a startling revelation to her, "this is more than I ought to expect,—more than you ought to offer. You have done me the greatest service already. Even were you my brother you would not sacrifice your career for me."

"Look on me as a brother who is ready to do that—and more," he said, pausing opposite to her. "I will wait within reach until—until some deliverance, some amelioration of your bitter lot, comes to you. I humbly, earnestly beg you to accept this service."

Mrs. Crichton leaned her elbow on the little table beside her, covered her face with her hand, and kept silence for a minute.

"No, Norman," she said, looking up to him with calm grave eyes and a white face,

"this is more than you ought to do for me, —more than, as a true friend, I ought to permit. Our lives must always be apart, and I could never in any way repay such devotion. I dare not accept it, Norman."

"Do you think I would ever ask anything in return?" he exclaimed, resuming his troubled walk. "Don't you see there is a certain selfishness in my wish to be at hand should you need me? Great heavens! how could I rest, how could I give my mind to anything, haunted as I should be night and day by the picture of you and those little ones at the mercy of such a—of Crichton. You don't know how the knowledge of what you endure has sunk into my heart and possessed my soul."

Then Mrs. Crichton spoke, earnestly, impressively, of the folly and imprudence of such a line of conduct; and, while he seemed to listen, Adair collected his thoughts, and perceived the mistake he had made in showing his hand. He would oppose her no more openly, but he would act in accordance with his own inclinations.

"You are awfully severe," he said, at length, in a lighter tone than he had yet used. "I'll think of your good advice,

and——" He broke off, and then resumed: "Even if I were to begin worrying for a ship to-morrow, don't suppose I should be appointed to one for months, however I might try. Anyhow, while I am ashore, for God's sake make use of me. Promise me this much."

"Yes, I do promise, if you promise to be sensible, to take up your life seriously, and not let any dreams of helping me—which you could only do in some masked way, which I ought never to accept, and hope never again to seek—interfere with your plans."

"I will be guided by you. I will do *anything*, if you will only trust me!" he exclaimed, imploringly.

"Oh, Norman, you are kind and true. How can I reject the help that seems sent to me by a merciful Providence?" cried the sorely tried woman, covering her face with her hands to hide the tears which would come.

Adair turned away and walked to the end of the room: he dared not look at her.

In a few moments she regained self-control.

"You said you were going to see my sister," she began, not quite steadily.

"And you want me to go?" he said, turning quickly.

"Yes, Norman."

"Suppose you come with me?"

"No; not to-day."

"All right: I'll go. And—I may come and see you again in a day or two? Remember, I am going to put myself under your guidance and be sensible, selfish, practical,—what you like."

"Very well, Norman." She held out her hand: it was cold and tremulous. He pressed it close.

"Don't despair," he said, huskily. "If we don't know the evil, neither do we know the good, which awaits us. Put me out of your mind, except as a useful servant whom you can summon in time of need."

CHAPTER VI.

A COUPLE of days later a telegram was handed to Adair as he sat at breakfast in the chambers where he had established himself, intending to make London his head-quarters for some time to come. Opening it, he read with great surprise that it was from his mother and dated from Paris; while he had believed she was at Nice. "Meet us at Charing Cross this evening. Secure rooms at Grosvenor," ran the brief despatch.

"This is sudden," thought Adair. "What can have started them off? Effie can't be worse, or she could not travel,—not so fast,—and my mother is not whimsical. Well, I'll be glad to see them again. I wonder what they mean to do with themselves this winter."

Yet he was a little ashamed of not feeling

gladder. His first vivid thought was, "How will their presence affect my friendship with Mrs. Crichton?" A little more reflection suggested that it might, on the whole, be favorable to more frequent meetings,—meetings less dangerously delightful because shared by others, yet opportunities of being with *her*, the one "her" in the world then for him.

He ought to let Mrs. Crichton know that his mother and sister were coming, to explain that he would probably be occupied next day, when he had intended to call. All this could be said in a note, of course. Perhaps it would be better to write; but then, as he should lose his intended visit to-morrow, he had a right to discount it to-day. Besides—— Well, anyhow he would call, and say his say face to face.

First he would walk over to Victoria and secure rooms for his people, and go on to Sutherland Gardens after. "I am sure to find her at home early." But he was disappointed.

The civil smiling parlor-maid informed him that Mrs. Crichton had taken the baby, who had had a very bad night, to Dr. W——'s, naming a well-known doctor who

made children his specialty, and she (the speaker) did not know when she would be back.

Adair was therefore reduced to write and resign himself to a prolonged absence of a few hours, which seemed an intolerable age to him.

It was a long, tiresome day, but it came to an end at last, and Adair stood waiting on the platform within a few minutes of the hour at which the Paris express was due.

It arrived with the usual punctuality, and Adair soon found himself in his sister's arms, while his mother contented herself with a hasty kiss and hand-pressure.

"I hope all's well with you?" he cried, heartily. "Your telegram gave me a start this morning, I can tell you. But I am delighted to see you.—Anything wrong, Effie?" to his sister, who was and evidently had been weeping.

"Wrong? Ah, yes. But I will tell you when we are alone."

These words startled her brother considerably, for Effie was a quiet, practical, "douce-like" creature, who rarely showed much emotion, and whose delicate health made her an object of constant care to her mother.

Mrs. Adair was a woman of shrewd sense and strong character, who, perhaps unconsciously, tyrannized over her submissive daughter.

"Eh, Norman, my dearie! it does me good to see you again. Oh, Effie has been just a new creature, with the change and the fine air, up to a week ago; and now she is as you see. But you shall hear all about it when we are alone."

"What mysteries are afoot?" asked Norman, laughing. "Well, come along. Can your maid look after your baggage and see it through the custom-house?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure: she is as good as a courier."

"Here, then, get into this cab. I have ordered dinner for you, and your courier can follow."

"Well, it is nice to hear English spoken all round you, after listening to French and German and Italian for near two years!" exclaimed Mrs. Adair, half an hour later, when she and her daughter after a hasty toilette sat down to an appetizing little dinner, her brow clearing as she looked at her son. "I have just been wearying to see you and take counsel with you.—Effie, dry your eyes, child, and eat a bit: you ought to be

famished by now; and it's my belief that neither mind nor body works properly if you cannot eat; and you never wanted the use of your judgment more than at the present time."

"Take a little champagne, old girl," said Adair, kindly. "I don't like to see you in the down-belows. You know if I can give you a helping hand I will. In spite of the tears, you are looking pounds better than when I left you at Florence this time last year."

"Thank you, Norman dear," murmured Effie, putting away her pocket-handkerchief and sipping her champagne, while her brother, not feeling much mental disturbance, continued his dinner with cheerful attention.

Mrs. Adair did most of the talking, and sprinkled her talk with dim allusions to "Effie's trouble" and "Effie's improvement until she became first taken up with havers," etc. As soon as dinner was over, the object of these remarks expressed a wish to go to bed, as she could not sit up any longer, and, pressing her brother's hand as she left the room, whispered a request that he would stand by her.

"What is it all about, mother?" asked Norman, returning to the table and refilling his glass.

"It isn't well to speak of family matters in a public room. Come up to my chamber,—it's like a drawing-room,—and have a cigar, while I explain things a bit. I'm sure I'm sore in need of a word of counsel."

"By all means, mother. I'll just settle for dinner, and follow you in a minute or two."

"Well, my dear lad," began Mrs. Adair as soon as her son joined her, "we had a beautiful time at first, and I didn't know myself, with money enough for everything we wanted, and no need to be worrying over the pennies; while the color was coming into Effie's pale cheeks, and light into her eyes, all thanks to you, my son."

Adair laughed and waved his hand deprecatingly.

"We made many nice and elegant friends, as I have recounted to you in my weekly letters, which I cannot say you have replied to with the regularity I could have wished. But young men are heedless. Well, all was quiet and happy till last April. We had stayed on at St. Remo, and there our friends

Mr. and Mrs. Hooper—very charming people, just given up to art and music and that sort of thing, having no bairns—introduced a very intelligent young man, one Mr. Hargrave, rather in delicate health, and looking the worse of wearing his hair long and having big black uncanny sort of eyes. They said he was a man of genius. Anyhow, he played the fiddle wonderfully; but I found it rather heart-breaking to listen to him. He was only half English. His mother was Italian, a Countess something, I believe. He was very pleasant, and took no end of trouble to find us summer lodgings in the hills, at a lovely spot. I wrote to you about it, you'll remember. But I didn't bargain for his taking a room in the same ramshackle old inn; but he did, and used to sit upon a rock and fiddle away by the hour. Effie said it was divine; I thought it was like a cat with a pain in its stomach. Then he began to teach Effie Italian; and really she got on surprisingly well; but one day, to my disgust, I found him on his knees in the garden, kissing her hand, and she crying salt tears. I didn't show how angry I was: I spoke him fair: they are a wicked, revengeful set, those Italians: he was brought up in Romish errors,

too, and could pay for a murder, and have it wiped out as easy as possible. I just asked what it all meant; and he made a speech as long as my arm about his adoration and devotion to my poor bit girlie, and talked of the golden glory of her hair,—meaning her red head,—and she drinking it all in. I did think she was more wise-like. So I gave him a piece of my mind, and told him that the young lady had no fortune, but was dependent on her brother, who would likely marry and not want to be hampered with her. Then—my word! but he threw his arms about, and swore, just awfully, that he only wanted the angel for herself alone, and none of our filthy lucre; which was vera" (with emphasis) "uncivil: people are a good deal more filthy without it. So then my troubles began; and a weary time I had. At first your poor sister heard reason a bit, and I took her on to Switzerland and down to the Italian lakes, and wherever we went my gentleman turned up, with his long hair and his fiddle. So I came on to Paris, thinking that would be more than he could manage; but no! the day before yesterday I had had a hard morning's shopping at the Louvre, and when I came into our little

sitting-room at the *pension* whom should I find but Mr. Hargrave, his tongue going like the clapper of a mill, and that silly bairnie Effie gazing at him, her two eyes just shining as if the sun was behind them. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak, she cries, 'Oh, mother dear, don't be angry, but I have promised to be his wife!' 'That you'll never be,' said I, very resolute. 'You shall come away to your brother: maybe you'll hear reason from him.' And here we are."

"It's all a confounded nuisance," said Norman, "but I am sorry for Effie. I don't fancy she has had much experience in love-affairs. And if she believes in the fellow, why, you and I will seem hard-hearted brutes to her. What do you want me to do?"

"Why, as her natural guardian, write to this man and forbid him the house. Tell him——"

"But don't you think it would be fairer to hear what he and Effie have to say for themselves first?"

"Oh, if you are going to play fast-and-loose in that fashion my poor girl will be coaxed away, and there will be no end of

troubles. You surely wouldn't like your sister to be joined to a Papist, and a Papist not worth a bawbee into the bargain?"

"Ay, there's the rub, really," he returned, laughing. "A Papist with property might be worth bringing into the true fold."

"Well, Norman, I thought you had more respect for your mother than to use such expressions."

"A thousand apologies! I know you are a sincere, good woman; but circumstances are omnipotent. Believe me, I am as averse as you can be to a half-Italian, long-haired, fiddling brother-in-law, but I must hear Effie before I can offer advice or take any line of conduct. I am sorry for her. I wish it had been some honest Britisher. It's a hard trial when a love-affair goes wrong,—especially to a woman."

"Goodness' sake, Norman, my man, don't talk like that: it seems as if you too were making a fool of yourself about some love-nonsense."

"Of course I am, mother. I should feel quite uncomfortable and out of the common if I were not in love with some one. You know that," said Adair, laughing. "But I

am not going to present you with a daughter-in-law just yet."

"Ah, my dear son, may you be guided in your choice, and not carried away by mere outward seeming!"

"Amen, mother. Now you look weary and sleepy; I'll leave you; but to-morrow I'll come over early and have a talk with Effie; then we'll decide what's best to be done. And, remember, I am really on your side; only we mustn't be harsh."

A note awaited Adair when he reached his rooms:

"My sincerest congratulations, dear Norman," it said. "It will be so delightful for you to have your mother and sister with you. Of course you will be quite taken up with them. Let me know where they are to be found. If agreeable to your mother, I should like to call on her. I fancy that in the old days I was not exactly first favorite with her. Now I want to make her like me. Send me a few hints. Baby is much better,—at least the doctor says so,—but the poor little darling is still restless and suffering. Come and see him when you can: for the present, of course, you belong to your

mother. I wonder if Effie remembers me,—that is, her old love for me?

"Yours very truly,

"CONSTANCE C."

Adair read this over slowly more than once. How like her writing was to herself,—clear, firm, yet graceful! Everything about her was intensely womanly! How full and soft the tones of her voice were! He could hear them speaking the words which his eyes were perusing. It would be delightful if friendship were to spring up between Constance and his womankind. What a help, what a support, his mother might be to Mrs. Crichton if she proved sympathetic! It was a tremendous "if," however. Some unaccountable prescience seemed to tell Adair that this ardent hope would never be fulfilled. His feeling for all that in any way touched the queen of his soul was too deep, too keen, not to bestow a measure of second-sight as regarded what concerned her.

He wrote a few lines thanking Constance for her note and gratefully accepting her offer of a visit to his mother.

The next morning was occupied by a long

and tearful interview with his sister, whose version of the trouble was very different from the one which he had heard from his mother.

Poor Effie was deeply touched by her brother's tenderness and consideration, though she perceived that he was strongly averse to such an impecunious marriage.

It was finally agreed that her lover should write his proposal and a statement of his financial condition and prospects, and Adair promised to take as favorable a view of matters as common sense would permit. The romantic young lassie was greatly cheered, and ran blithely to her room to indite a small volume to her *fiancé*.

Adair was very attentive to his mother during the first days of her stay, escorting her to her solicitor's and stockbroker's offices, and taking her to the few "sights" she wished to see.

The evening but one after their arrival in London Mrs. Adair and Effie dined with Norman at his chambers, a festivity which greatly pleased and excited the former. To be a guest in her son's abode greatly amused the shrewd Scotchwoman.

"Eh!" she exclaimed, "you have a fine

set-out here, and I'm thinking *your* housekeeping would keep a family."

"Oh, I am a strict economist, I assure you. I rarely dine at home."

"Then your cook seems well experienced, for all that."

"Oh, so she or he is," said Adair, smiling, the banquet, of course, having been sent in from a restaurant.

"Oh, Norman," exclaimed Effie, "we had a visit from Mrs. Crichton to-day. How handsome and sweet she is! I should never have known her. She used not to be such an elegant creature, as well as I remember."

"Fine feathers make fine birds," remarked her mother. "Constance Hill seems to have done well for herself in the way of marriage. She is a wee airified; not but that she is very civil and soft-spoken."

"Oh, she is a capital woman, quite devoted to her home and the children and all that. The youngsters are such jolly little things, especially the girl, with lovely eyes just like her mother's,—a thorough little flirt,—has made up her mind to marry me."

"H'm!" murmured Mrs. Adair, helping herself to a little more mayonnaise. "I

hope she is kept in her place. The way people spoil their bairns nowadays is just fearful."

"Oh, these little creatures are patterns of discipline, obedience, and all the rest of it," cried Adair.

"I am glad to hear it. It seems to me you are very intimate with our old acquaintance. I wonder you did not speak more of her in your letters."

"But I did. I told you of our meeting at a dinner-party, and of staying with them in the country, and——"

"I know; but you did not say that you were just like a brother in the house."

"Yes, of course. It was very nice to have Effie's place supplied when she was galivanting about with fascinating musicians," returned Adair, lightly. He perceived that for some inscrutable reason his mother had not taken to Mrs. Crichton, and therefore decided to say as little as possible on the subject.

"I must say she is very polite. She has invited us to dinner on Tuesday first, as she wishes to introduce her husband to me. I'm glad to hear she manages her children well, for I remember she was a bit flighty and too

ready with her tongue long ago. She talks fast even now. She said you were quite a comfort to her,—which was not a wise-like speech for a young married woman."

"Not so very young, mother," remarked Effie. "She is as old as Norman."

"She is nearly two years younger," returned her brother.

"And that's old enough for discretion," said Mrs. Adair, gravely.

Her son changed the subject by proposing a visit to the theatre on the following night, and Mrs. Crichton was not again mentioned.

As he anticipated, an invitation to dinner at Sunderland Gardens reached Adair that evening. A line at the end said, "If you are free, come to luncheon to-morrow,"—on reading which he breathed a prayer that the letter from Hargrave which Effie so eagerly expected would not arrive next morning and compel him to pass it with his sister.

His wish was fulfilled, and one o'clock found him in the presence he longed for.

"It is five days since we have seen you, Norman," exclaimed Mrs. Crichton, greeting him with frank pleasure when he entered:

she was busy with some flowers just arrived from the country. "I cannot shake hands with you; my fingers are wet. I want to put all these into water as soon as possible."

How sweet and home-like the room was! how well and bright she looked! Yes, she had bloomed into greater beauty since the day he had been able to set her free,—free from the haunting terror which was undermining her life, and which she had borne so marvellously. Ah, what a blessed thing money and the power it gave was, sometimes!

"This box from our summer quarters is a treasure trove of beauty. If I were rich I should spend a great deal on flowers; but no flowers are so enchanting as the flowers you rear yourself. I should deeply enjoy a garden. It is such a healthy joy for children, too," standing back a little to contemplate a large china bowl she had just filled, and drying her hands on a duster.

"I believe that you view everything in heaven and earth only as it affects the children!" exclaimed Adair, with an unconscious feeling of jealousy towards those young people.

She laughed. "I am afraid that is exactly what I do not do, Norman. When I sit over my work, I do not think of them as much perhaps as a mother ought."

"Of whom do you think, then?" he asked, drawing a chair to the table on which the flowers lay, that he might watch her at his ease. "Mr. Crichton?"

"Oh, yes, I used to think of him continually; but you delivered me from that, dear Norman. I wonder if you know the enormous deliverance you wrought for me?"

Adair did not answer immediately: he was gazing at her long, white fingers, which were deftly piling up the débris of stalks and leaves previous to ringing for their removal.

"Then you don't think so much of Crichton now?" he said, slowly.

"No. You see, I have not so much reason to fear him; but I pity him often. He is not happy, though he is so determined to have everything he likes."

"H'm! pity is akin to love."

"I hope so," she returned, with a sigh.

"You forget all this time," said Adair, "that you haven't shaken hands with me."

"Ah, yes," giving him her hand. He held it firmly.

"Do you know I am a bit of a chiromancer? Let me tell your fortune. I learned the art from an old witch of Thessaly at Port Said."

"Ah, yes, tell me. I am very curious about the future."

"Let me see," bending her hand back and pretending to read the pink palm. "Ah, the line of life has been almost severed by some great blow or trial; but it is past,—though there are trials to come. You have a dangerous enemy, whom you cannot baffle unassisted: so a good fairy godmother has sent you a devoted friend, to whom you must turn in every moment of difficulty."

"Norman, you are a transparent impostor!" she exclaimed, laughing, yet coloring and trying to draw her hand away.

"No, no! I haven't told you half. A little later," he went on, holding her hand in a grasp she could not loosen, "you will be called on to make an important decision, on which your future will depend."

"And how shall I decide?" she asked, trying to laugh the seriousness of his manner away.

"Well and wisely," said Adair, suddenly releasing her hand, "though with some tears of compassion for another's suffering."

"Really, Norman, these mystic pretensions do not suit you at all," cried Mrs. Crichton, as the servant entered to clear away the remains of the flowers. "You have far too honest a face to put on such airs successfully."

Here the two elder children came running in to hug and kiss their favorite playfellow, and then they went to luncheon.

It was always a pleasant, cheery meal, though the children needed attention and repression; but there was something so confidential and familiar about the informal meal as to make Adair feel that he was indeed one with the woman he loved so well and her children.

It was all very wrong and wicked, but that was his fault, his sin only. He was ready to pay the price; he was strong enough never to offend Constance, and for the rest he could suffer alone.

"I had quite a long chat with your mother, Norman," said Mrs. Crichton, when the children were carried off for their afternoon walk and their mother with her

guest had returned to her morning room. "She is a very interesting person. How it carried me back to old times to hear her speak! I remember her voice so well. She is much more Scotch than you are, Norman."

"You see, I was brought up almost altogether in England."

"Yes. You are younger than your sister, are you not?"

"I am."

"She looks ill, as if she had been crying bitterly."

"I am afraid she is rather miserable, poor girl," returned Adair; and he proceeded to give Mrs. Crichton the Hargrave history; it had become quite natural for him to tell her everything.

Mrs. Crichton looked very grave. "It does not sound a promising affair, Norman. I prefer foreigners who are purely foreign to these continentalized Englishmen; and then, unless a musician is a genius, and an acknowledged genius, it is quite an inferior position. You must persuade her to give it up."

"I suppose so," said Adair. "But it is rather hard. I don't fancy she has ever had

the ghost of a lover before. Life without love is very dreary."

"Oh, some kind of love one must have, but I am not sure that life is not more truly and peacefully happy without the love of lovers."

"That sometimes brings plenty of pain, I dare say; but it is worth all it costs. At least I fancy so," he added, checking himself.

Mrs. Crichton did not look up from her needle-work. She sighed softly, and said, in a reflective tone, "How awfully anxious I shall be when the time comes for my precious Winnie to be sought in marriage!" There was a pause; then she startled Adair by saying, as if to herself, "I should like her to marry some one like you, Norman: you seem to me so good and true."

"Thank you; you pay me the highest compliment possible," replied Adair, his brown cheek flushing a deep red. "Shall I wait for your dainty daughter?"

"Oh, no," she returned. "I hope you will be happily settled with a sweet sympathetic companion long before poor Winnie is called upon to face the dangers and difficulties of that most momentous choice, the

choice of a husband. What a long, long way to look forward to! What may not happen before!"

"I never look far ahead: the present is all-sufficient for me," said Adair, in a low tone, and keeping his eyes on the carpet.

"Ah, Norman, your present is very good, I am glad to think, but you must think of your future,—your career, I mean."

"Yes, I know you want to send me off to sea; but I am not going yet, even to please *you*."

"No doubt you will do as you choose. But are you coming to dinner on Tuesday?"

"Most certainly."

"Then let us go round and see my sister."

"By all means."

CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning's post brought bitter mortification and floods of tears to poor Effie Adair.

Her lover sent a shuffling, temporizing letter to Norman, in which, with many professions of devotion and self-sacrifice, he withdrew his petition for the hand of Mr. Adair's adorable sister. He could not ask her to share his poor lot or to resign the luxuries of her exalted position; but the memory of the brief happiness enjoyed in her society would raise him to a nobler standpoint and cast a halo over his past, etc., etc., etc.

Adair read very clearly between the lines, that the highly gifted Hargrave understood from his letter that he had a man of resolution and common sense to deal with, and, moreover, that the fair Effie was entirely dependent on her brother,— a fact he prob-

ably did not believe on her mother's statement.

Of course no reasoning would induce Effie to accept this explanation. No, her beloved Ulrico was the noblest, the most disinterested of men, actuated only by the purest and highest affection for herself. He had no doubt been addressed in a hard and cruel manner by her hard and prejudiced brother, and feared to risk the anger of her family by calling on the woman he loved.

Norman at last grew tired of her folly. "Well, Effie," he said, "have it your own way. You will come round to my opinion yet. Anyway, the thing is at an end, for the fellow gives you up. I wish you would put him out of your head. I promise you that the first straight-going British gentleman you accept, I'll give you a decent 'tocher;' but I hate half-breeds." With this narrow-minded expression of opinion Adair left the room and bent his way to the City, as he took care to call on Crichton occasionally to ask his advice about investments (which he did not always follow) and to inquire into the proceedings of the "Sea-Side Villa Company." It cost him a good bit of self-control to cultivate Crichton even in a small

degree; but it was well worth his while to exert it, for Crichton was jealous in a peculiar fashion. To suspect his wife of ever giving a thought to any one save himself never entered his head, nor that any man would admire her save in the most abstract manner; but that any one, male or female, should prefer her society, her conversation, her opinions, to his, was an astounding and unpardonable error. It was, then, very essential to keep well with the master of No. 19, Sutherland Gardens, who was master of so much into the bargain.

Adair was always welcome to Crichton, who honestly loved the rich and inexperienced. He liked to pass as a man of vast knowledge in money and other matters, and, firmly believing in himself, succeeded in creating faith in others. But Adair had something of Scotch shrewdness as regarded "siller," and made much show about a small matter of trust; nevertheless it answered the purpose of the moment.

The ensuing few days were by no means pleasant ones to Mrs. Adair and her daughter. Norman wisely kept out of the way, with the horror of disagreeable scenes peculiar to his sex. There was one matter, how-

ever, concerning which he was anxious to jog his mother's memory. It would, he thought, gratify Mrs. Crichton if she called on her sister: so he opened the subject one morning when he had looked in on her soon after breakfast.

"Oh, by the way, have you called on Miss Hill?"

"What! Mrs. Crichton's sister?"

"Yes."

"Well, no: I didn't think of it. I thought we might meet her at Sutherland Gardens to-morrow."

"My dear mother! why, she has not been across her threshold for years."

"Eh! is she that bad? Constance just shook her head about her, and said she was no better; but I did not make out she was quite a cripple. What is it?"

"Acute rheumatism, I believe."

"It's a severe discipline,—a curious dispensation; but we can't know what is good for us."

"We are generally at odds in opinion on that subject with the higher powers, I must say," said Adair, laughing.

"Don't be irreverent, my son. Well, I have a brougham for the afternoon, and I'll

just go over and see Mary Hill: maybe, as it's a melancholy kind of a visit, it may suit Effie. Eh, Norman, I have had a weary time! she's just off her head about that fiddler man."

"Yes, it's hard lines for her. Couldn't you go somewhere where there's a preserve of curates? Has she any tendency to go to confession? She might screw some comfort, and maybe a fresh lover, out of that."

"I am not pleased to hear you jeer in that way. God forbid that a child of mine should be given to those Romish practices! I wish, Norman, you would cultivate a soberer spirit."

"All right, mother: I'll behave better in future. Where is Effie?"

"Oh, in her room, writing poetry into a book."

"What! have her troubles turned her poetical?"

"Hoot toot! no. She is writing it out of one book into another."

"Why the deuce doesn't she buy the poems she likes and keep the lot of them?"

"It's better as it is: it's more of a play. I am glad to say she is a trifle brighter, though,

ever since she called on Mrs. Crichton. I was too busy, and I didn't like her visit to be left unreturned, so I just sent Effie in a cab to Sutherland Gardens. She said Mrs. Crichton was a sweet, sympathetic woman when she came back."

"Ah, I dare say she gave her some good advice, if Effie confided in her at all. Mrs. Crichton is a very sensible woman."

"More likely she talked a lot of sentimental rubbish. Good advice is never considered sympathetic."

"Perhaps you are right. Good-morning, mother. Don't forget to call on Mary Hill."

It had been a busy day, the Tuesday on which Mrs. Adair and her son and daughter were to dine at Sutherland Gardens. Mrs. Adair had at last decided on going to Torquay for the winter, and found that she had as much shopping to do as if her destination had been a desolate island where the resources of civilization were unknown. She was, therefore, barely punctual, and found her son already arrived.

Mrs. Adair's general aspect conveyed an idea of importance: she was impressive, too, in her manner of speech, and was, moreover,

well and richly dressed. In fact, she was the style of guest Mr. Crichton delighted to honor, and he made himself agreeable accordingly.

Miss Adair was rather cool and stiff to her brother, but looked better and brighter; while he greeted her with kindly warmth.

"It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to my house, my dear Mrs. Adair," said Mr. Crichton, in his best manner, "both as an old friend of my wife's and as the mother of my young friend here, whom we find a great acquisition, I assure you. You see the children take quite possession of him," waving his hand towards Norman, on whose knee Winnie was contentedly perched.

"And sweet wee bairns they are," ejaculated his guest.

"Come and speak to the lady, Winnie," said her father.

Winnie looked with some awe at Mrs. Adair, and hesitated.

"Do you hear me?" he exclaimed, sternly.

Winnie slipped from Norman's encircling arm and came up with outstretched hand, her eyes fixed on Crichton.

"And what's your name, my lammie?" asked Mrs. Adair, smiling on her.

"Winnie," said the child, and turned away.

"Stop!" cried her father. "Don't run off, like a little savage, the moment you have spoken.—I'm afraid, Mrs. Adair, there is very little discipline in my house. Mrs. Crichton is too soft-hearted with her children,—lets them do as they like."

"You are soft-hearted yourself, George," said his wife, pleasantly.

"Oh, I am fond enough of them, but I don't spoil them: there's the difference.—Here, Georgie."

The boy was absorbed in a picture-book at the other end of the room, and did not hear. Crichton frowned, and repeated his call, but without raising his voice. Still no answer. A third time he called, now in stentorian tones. The boy started, and came quickly.

"Why did you not come at once, sir?"

"Did you call before?" returned Georgie.

"That's rather a clever dodge," said his father, laughing harshly, "but it won't do, my boy. Be off to your bed, for disobedience and deceit!"

"But, papa, I did *not* hear; indeed I did not."

"I'll be bound you'll hear another time. Off with you!"

"I am sure he did not hear," put in Mrs. Crichton, who had flushed up and then turned very white.

"Oh, I'll cure his deafness," cried his father. "Go, sir!"

The child's eyes filled with tears. His mother went over to him, and said, gently, "You must obey, dear. I will explain to father."

She went with him to the door, kissed him gently, and closed it behind him.

"I am sure you managed your children well, Mrs. Adair, or you would not have sent out so good a specimen as our friend Norman here."

Adair had kept profoundly still, but his eyes had sought Mrs. Crichton, and they exchanged a glance of profound sympathy.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "there isn't a finer, better little chap anywhere than your boy, Crichton!"

"Maybe so; but——"

"Dinner is on the table," said the parlor-maid; and the brief but unpleasant episode was over.

Possibly Crichton feared he might have

made a bad impression; but at dinner he was especially amiable and did the host with his most gracious air of *bonhomie*. Mrs. Adair was a somewhat profuse talker in a slow and pertinacious fashion, and her host listened as if to dropping pearls of wit and wisdom; he was complimentary to Effie and cordial to Norman; but he took little or no notice of his wife, who was rather silent and preoccupied, her heart aching for her boy, whom she pictured sobbing in his bed, his little heart aching and burning with a sense of wrong and injustice.

By a gallant effort Adair forced himself to take part in the conversation and cover the unusual quiet of his hostess.

"I was very pleased to see your sister Mary yesterday," said Mrs. Adair. "She is changed a good bit; but, as I was saying to her, most things are mixed with mercy, and at least she seems to have every needful comfort, which is something to be thankful for."

"I am so much obliged to you for calling on her. I have not seen her since, but I am sure your visit was a great pleasure to her."

"Not seen her for twenty-four hours!"

exclaimed Crichton. "Well, that is a wonder.—I assure you, Mrs. Adair, I don't fancy if the house was on fire, or the children at the last gasp, my wife would omit her diurnal visit to her invalid sister."

"Mr. Crichton does not often indulge in such imaginative flights. As I am a large percentage of the mercy with which her lot is mixed, I shall try to see my sister as regularly as I can," said Mrs. Crichton, gently.

"I'm sure it must be very nice to have a sister," cried Effie: "another girl would feel for you so much more than a brother. Men are hard."

"If you ask me, Miss Adair, I should say all men, even a brother, would be soft to a young lady like you," said Crichton, gallantly.

"Ah, Mr. Crichton, you little know!" returned Effie, shaking her head dolefully.

"Ah, Miss Adair, do they treat you badly? If so, come and tell your troubles to me. Your brother will show you the way to my office, and I'll see what can be done for you."

"Eh! and what will Mrs. Crichton say?" asked the young lady, coquettishly.

"Oh, she isn't jealous; nor, for that matter, am I. I have no reason. If I had, I'd make it pretty hot all round, I can tell you."

"Dear me, Mr. Crichton! I should be quite afraid of you."

"No, no; none need fear me, if they are honest and above-board; but I never would forgive deceit." And to Adair's indignation, he glanced at his wife.

"Deceit is just intolerable, especially to the Scotch," observed Mrs. Adair, solemnly.

"Yes," rejoined her son: "at least they have a great objection to be deceived. Whether they have an equally strong objection to deceive is another question."

"Eh, Norman, you should not speak against your own: it's not patriotic."

"I am not speaking against the Scotch. My belief is that if we could get at the real truth respecting morals (and I suppose truth is included in morals) among all nations, there would not be a pin to choose between them."

"But there can be no doubt, my dearie, that religious truth was specially given to the Northern Protestants,—a precious gift."

"A very unfair one!" exclaimed Adair,

smiling. "Why should the Northerns be so highly favored?"

"Take another glass of claret, Mrs. Adair," said the host.

"No, I am much obliged to you. I cannot say I like sacred topics discussed at a dinner-table."

"Shall we go up-stairs?" suggested Mrs. Crichton.

The ladies were soon followed by Adair and his host. Then Effie, on being pressed, sang some Scotch ballads in a high, shrill voice, and Mr. Crichton applauded. He said he liked songs with some spirit in them, —not things that would make you cry your eyes out.

Mrs. Adair, who was sitting by the fire, now begged Mrs. Crichton to favor them. She good-humoredly assented, choosing a sweet, sad German air with English words. She sang with simple pathos, and her voice was sweet and true.

"Thank you," said Adair, in a low tone, when she returned to her place.

"There's a lively tune for you!" said Crichton, contemptuously.

"Indeed it's a trifle sad," observed Mrs. Adair.

"But infinitely sweet," added her son.

"It's growing late," continued Mrs. Adair. "I think we had better be going homewards. I'll trouble your people to call a cab."

"What's your hurry, Mrs. Adair?" asked Crichton. "You must take a little whiskey and soda before you go. I can promise you the whiskey is real Scotch."

"No, thank you: it is just the only Scotch thing I cannot abide."

"When do you go to Torquay?" asked Mrs. Crichton.

"On Thursday at latest. I want to be in time to secure good rooms; and Effie has started coughing again."

"Oh, it isn't much, mother."

In a few minutes the cab was announced and adieux were exchanged.

"It has given me great pleasure to make your acquaintance," said Mr. Crichton, offering his arm to Mrs. Adair. "I hope to see you again when you pass through town."

"Good-night, dear Mrs. Crichton," whispered Effie. "You don't know how much good you did me by your suggestion that *he* may just be waiting till he is in a better position: so I'll have faith and patience."

"I must see them to their hotel, I suppose," said Adair, in a discontented tone.

"Yes, of course you must; and please go, Norman. I am going to run away to my poor little Georgie: his heart must be nearly broken." Her voice was broken by a half-suppressed sob.

"When can I come again?" murmured Adair, catching her hand in both his own.

"Oh, not for a day or two; not till your mother has left town. I am going to be busy."

"Very well. On Friday at tea-time?"

"Yes, that will do. Go, dear Norman; they are waiting for you."

She turned and ran swiftly up-stairs.

The effect of this evening was irritating to Adair. He was almost dismayed at the height to which his dislike, nay, hatred, of Crichton had risen. The dominance of such a passion was sure to darken his judgment and weaken his power of befriending Constance. He must fight against its growth. The man was growing more and more odious. Was his selfish greed undermining or unsettling his mental balance? If so, the consequences to

wife and children were incalculable, and the necessity for his presence in England was stronger than ever. How would it all end? Well, all he could do was to live from day to day and meet emergencies as they arose.

Adair hardly saw his mother in the time which intervened between the Crichton dinner and her departure for Torquay. The evening before she started she was again her son's guest in his rooms, and then found an opportunity before her daughter's arrival (as that young lady had prolonged her shopping) to confide her fears to Norman,—fears that Effie had surreptitiously sent a letter to "that fiddler man,"—"for I found her crying and blowing her nose over a sheet of foreign note-paper," continued Mrs. Adair, "and I am not that sure of Jenkins, our maid: she is a prudent, careful woman, but too fond of the siller: she'd post a letter to the deil for half a crown."

Before Norman could console her, Effie appeared, and their private confab was over.

It was rather a pleasant little dinner. Adair himself was in good spirits. Indeed, he was half ashamed of the relief his mother's and sister's approaching departure afforded him. His feeling for them was

kind and warm, but he had not before rea
ized that they were an embodiment of Mr
Grundyism and disposed to take the na
rowest possible view of any by-path diver
ing from the beaten track, and—in fac
were in the way.

"And you'll come down and see us no
and again, Norman?" said his mother, as th
"good-night" time drew near. "Eh, Effi
it will be nice and home-like to have hi
coming down from Saturday to Monday.—
And you'll stay with us at the new year?"

"Of course, mother dear. I shall b
delighted."

"You must mind and tell Mrs. Crichto
that I am very sorry I could not call befo
leaving. She is a lucky woman to hav
met with such a sensible, wise-like husban
as she has. He's just a sound, far-seein
man."

"Oh, yes, he is all right, with an eye t
the main chance and a strong determinatio
to have his own way."

"And a very good way it is, Norman.
can't say I think *her* quite the angel yo
do."

"Eh, mother, she is a sweet woman,
cried Effie.

"Sweet or not, she was foolish to back up her bairn against his father."

"I thought she exercised wonderful self-control when Crichton spoke so brutally and stupidly to the poor little chap," cried Adair, incautiously.

"Just you take care, Norman, my man. A fair face oughtn't to make up for everything, nor long soft looks asking for compassion, neither. You just be honest, and do justice to the husband as well as to the handsome wife."

"Good God, mother! what are you talking about?" exclaimed Adair, flushing red even to his brow.

"What it is my duty to warn you against, my son." This with a solemn shake of the head.

Her words struck him with a sudden terror. What, was he—and, still more, was *she* so unguarded as to betray themselves to a countrified old lady like his mother? And had Constance anything to betray? But he must not treat her observations seriously. "'Evil be to him'—or her—'who evil thinks,'" he said, with a forced laugh. "I think you may leave Mrs. Crichton to take

care of herself, and of me too, for that matter. What! going already?"

"Well, it's close on ten o'clock, and there's something in the London air that just weighs me down."

"What hour does your train go to-morrow?"

"Twelve-fifteen."

"Well, I'll be there. And let me have a line to say how you got down.—Cheer up, Effie. It makes me miserable to see you look so."

Effie gave him a hearty kiss in token of forgiveness, and mother and daughter drove off to their hotel.

His mother's shrewd remarks gave Adair food for thought, and showed him, as if by a flash of lightning, how weak honor, principle, conscience, would prove as bulwarks against the rising tide of passion if he caught a glimpse of a response in Constance Crichton's clear, calm eyes. But he believed (and tried to thank God for the belief) that she had no love save for her children,—only a kindly sense of gratitude towards himself. The faint recognition of his feeling for her which she had shown when telling him of her troubles at their summer abode seemed

to have passed away and been forgotten. Her manner to him since his return to town was as frank, as confidential, as unembarrassed, as at the first. "It must never be disturbed," was his firm conclusion.

His mother gone, the rest of the day hung heavy on Adair's hands. Town and the club were still empty, at least of his acquaintances. Still he was proof against the temptation to run up to Sutherland Gardens to report his mother's departure. No, he would wait till to-morrow, as he had promised. So he wandered into a Regent Street toy-shop, and laid in some offerings for his little chums. "It is quite an age since I gave them anything," he thought. Then he went to see a new piece at the Princess's, was dreadfully bored, and came away reflecting on the tameness of dramatic passion compared to the tremendous force of reality.

Friday was a crisp, russet October day, and Adair walked across the parks to Sutherland Gardens and arrived a little before luncheon-time, to receive an uproarious welcome from the children, who had scattered the cargo of toys he had despatched to them the day before all over their mother's morning room. She soon joined them, and

thanked him more eloquently with her eyes than with her lips for his thought of her dear ones.

They were rather noisy at luncheon, and eager to take some of their new treasures to a neighboring square and display them to their playmates. After their departure Mrs. Crichton proceeded to put her room in order, with Adair's help.

"Mr. Crichton has gone to Gravesend in a new steamer belonging to one of his acquaintances. There is to be a gay party on board. I don't suppose he will be back till midnight," she said, after a while.

"Indeed! Then suppose you come with me to the Strand. There's a pretty musical piece on there. You never seem to go anywhere. I don't suppose Crichton would mind," cried Adair, eagerly.

"Very likely not. But, Norman, I always think my few free evenings belong to my poor Mary. Life is so sad. It is too selfish to deprive her of anything I can give."

"Do you ever think of yourself in any way?"

"Oh, yes! don't fancy me a dreadful piece of perfection."

"No, I don't. May I not come and have dinner, or tea, or whatever it is?"

"Yes, certainly. Why not?"

"All right. I have to meet a man at the club about six: then I'll come back to Myrtle Grove."

Their talk flowed on about some books Miss Hill had been interested in, and after a short pause Mrs. Crichton said,—

"You will miss your mother and sister, Norman."

"Yes. My mother is not looking very well."

"Mr. Crichton was quite charmed with her; they seemed very sympathetic. But, somehow, I don't think she liked me. Do you know, I feel a little afraid of her."

"She is a little severe; but she has been a capital mother."

"Ah, she is strong. How fortunate for herself! I could see she thought I spoiled my boy. Poor, dear Georgie! I saw *you* felt for him, Norman."

"I did, with all my heart. I'd have given anything to have brought him back and comforted—that is, put him into your arms, which must mean comfort."

"I don't know how I bore it. It was one

of my bitter moments. He is growing so capricious with the children. What a bad effect it will have on them! How helpless they are! How helpless *I* am! But I must not lose courage: it is all I have between me and despair."

"Yes. Hold on to it, for God's sake. But how—how will it all end?"

"Do not ask that, Norman: I dare not. I live only from day to day. I never think of next week."

"Nor I. What is life to me, except so far as it can be of use to you?"

The words were past his lips before he could pull up, and he stood still, with a sudden sense of guilt and self-betrayal.

The color mounted slowly in Mrs. Crichton's cheek, and her face grew grave, but her voice was calm and steady as she said,—

"Norman, you must neither speak nor think in this strain. Beyond an occasional passing help, you can do nothing for me: more would turn the balance from usefulness to harm. Oh, I am not ungrateful. You rescued me from what I dare not think of; and, oh, if I am in a sore strait I will come to you. It is the only support I have,—the knowledge that you can and will befriend

me. But, Norman, do not give me too much,—not what I can never repay or return. I want you to be happy." Her voice broke.

"I want nothing; I ask nothing. Forget any folly I may have uttered. Use me as you will."

She stretched out her hand, which he clasped and ventured to kiss for the first time. "We will meet at your sister's," he said, and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE days which immediately followed this interview were embittered to Adair by self-reproach. He dreaded the effect of his self-betrayal; for it was impossible that Mrs. Crichton could mistake the nature of his devotion. Suppose she took fright and withdrew her quiet confidence? he could never forgive himself. He had not the courage to call on her, though burning to see her again. In this restless frame of mind he was delighted to receive the following note:

"I wish you would look in here to-day or to-morrow. I am not quite satisfied about the Sea-Side Villa Company. We think of calling a meeting of share-holders. I want to explain one or two points.

"Yours truly,

"G. CRICHTON."

It was dated from his office, and reached Adair early in the afternoon. With a vague

hope that this interview would lead to the drawing closer of the links which he feared had been loosened, he started for the City at once. "He will be sure to ask me to dinner," he pondered, as he drove along, "and I'll go. I shall soon see how the land lies."

Occupied with his own thoughts, he did not heed the crowded streets through which he drove, and it seemed only a few minutes after he got into the hansom before it stopped. The driver lifted the trap, and said,—

"Can't get no further, sir; there's been a haccident, and the street is blocked."

"All right: I'll walk," returned Adair, who paid the man and jumped out.

There was a confusion of men and horses in the street, in the midst of which the helmets of several policemen could be descried, and Adair was naturally attracted.

"What has happened?" he asked a respectable-looking man who had also paused to look on.

"Bad accident, sir. Gentleman was crossing, and a mail-cart came by full tilt; the shaft caught his shoulder and hurled him under that big wagon. The wheel has gone

right over his middle.—Stay, here they come." And the crowd parted to permit the passage of a stretcher, carried by two policemen, on which lay a covered burden.

"Where are they taking the poor fellow?" asked Adair.

"To the station close by. The doctor isn't sure whether there's life in him or not," returned a man who had been in the middle of the crowd. "You see the streets are slippery, especially on the slope here" (it was in Canon Street), "and the carter couldn't pull up."

Urged by a vague curiosity, Adair followed, managing to get near the stretcher, round which the crowd pressed so closely that the cloth which concealed the injured man was disarranged and the face displayed, —only for a moment, but that moment sufficed to strike Adair motionless, silent, powerless, as he recognized Crichton.

The crowd moved on, jostling and nearly overturning the stunned, stupefied individual whose idle curiosity was now so strangely satisfied. For a minute or two he could not think,—he could hardly see; but he rallied quickly, and bent his steps to the station, where he sent in his card to the inspector

with a pencilled line to say that he could identify the sufferer.

After what seemed a long time to Adair, during which the doctor ascertained that life was extinct, he was admitted, and informed the authorities that he was well acquainted with the deceased, the contents of whose pocket-book corroborated his statements. He therefore undertook the painful task of breaking the death-tidings to the family.

Within an hour from the time he set out for the City he was speeding westward with his momentous intelligence. He felt still dazed, but his ideas were growing clearer. What an extraordinary change had a few minutes wrought in the present and future of the woman who was so dear to him! She was free. Never again would she tremble before the despot who was her inferior. Had he executed his new will? No matter. He (Adair) had, thank heaven, enough and to spare,—enough to make her a happy tranquil home which should atone for and obliterate the past, if (what a tremendous if!) she could be won to think of him as a partner for life. Certainly, so far, even had Adair been the most self-conceited of men, he could not flatter himself that she regarded him as any-

thing more than a kind and useful frien
Still, he could not help hoping. Was it n
selfish and heartless to think in this strai
when he had scarcely escaped from the pre
ence of death? He did not know; he di
not care. How slowly the man drove! ho
blocked the streets were with traffic! A
last, at last, he reached the well-know
door.

"Is Mrs. Crichton at home?"

"No, sir," returned the servant, startle
out of her well-bred impassibility by his di
turbed looks. "She has been out son
time. Won't you walk in and sit down?"

"Thank you. Perhaps Mrs. Crichton
at her sister's: pray send round there an
say I am anxious to see her."

"Very well, sir."

It seemed to Adair that he paced th
dining-room for ages before the maid r
turned to say that her mistress was not wit
Miss Hill. How much longer should h
have to wait? Even while he thought thi
the door-bell sounded, and Mrs. Crichto
entered, a slightly startled look in her eye
On meeting his, she stopped short.

"Norman!" she exclaimed. "What
it?"

"I am sorry to tell you," he began, hurriedly, "that Mr. Crichton has met with a—a—serious accident."

"How? Where?" she exclaimed. "Is he very badly hurt? Does he suffer much? I must go to him at once."

"He does not suffer at all," said Adair, in a low tone.

"Ah!" she cried, catching his arm and looking in his face, "he is dead!"

"He is dead," echoed Adair.

"Dead!" she repeated, with a little cry, —"before he knew one gleam of true pure pleasure, one touch of real love. What a lost life! Oh, I might have done more for him, had I been braver and stronger." She grew so white that Adair thought she was going to faint, and hastily drew forward a chair, into which she sank. "Tell me all. My brain seems dulled and still," she said.

Adair's story was brief, but she did not seem to take it in. The shock was too great. She stretched out her hands with something of the pathetic helplessness of the blind as she rose and moved towards the door, as if not quite conscious.

Adair was alarmed, and rang for the ser-

vants, to whom he hastily told the tidings of their master's death. Then Nurse took charge of her mistress. "She is fairly overdone, even without this shock," she said. "If you'll tell cook, who is a steady, sensible woman, she'll have things ready and send for the doctor: he lives close by. I will not leave my mistress."

Adair looked wistfully after Mrs. Crichton, but she did not seem to see him, and soon he found ample employment, as every one applied to him for directions and suggestions, until the doctor, who was also a personal friend of Mrs. Crichton's, came to share his responsibilities, and he escaped to tell the particulars of the fatal accident to Miss Hill.

The days which immediately ensued were fully occupied with the preparations for the ceremonies and business which death necessitates.

Adair had not seen Mrs. Crichton since the day on which he had brought her the tidings of her widowhood. She had sent the little ones away with their nurse out of the house of mourning, and had for a companion and guest a lady who was a distant cousin of Mr. Crichton's, the wife of a well-

off manufacturer in Leeds, the only member of his family he had ever acknowledged.

The widow was a striking and stately figure in her trailing garments of deepest black as she received the funeral guests with a composed and reverent air, but Adair had few opportunities of speaking to her. He felt how her hand trembled as he held it, and whispered a petition to be allowed to call upon her soon.

"I will write to you, my dear good friend," she replied. "At present I have scarcely an hour I can call my own."

Already he noticed that the guarded inscrutable look had gone from her eyes,—they were franker, softer; and he thanked God that the shadow had been lifted from her life.

After the funeral Mrs. Crichton went to her room. Most of the guests dispersed at the cemetery, but Adair and the lawyer returned to the house, where the latter spoke for a few minutes to the widow, then he and Adair walked away together.

"After all," said the lawyer, "that accident was, on the whole, a stroke of luck for Mrs. Crichton. Her husband had made a very unjust will. He had appointed a man

she objected to, and another, a stranger to her and a busy M.P., executors to his will and guardians to his children, and bequeathed her a pittance of only two hundred and fifty a year. He was a very wrong-headed man, very,—especially of late. I have sometimes doubted his complete sanity. I suspect his wife had a deuced hard time of it. Crichton was on his way to my office to execute this last will and testament (which I assure you I fought against as long as I could) when he met with his death."

"I trust Mrs. Crichton will have peace for the rest of her life," returned Adair.

"Well, yes, I hope so. But it is more than I expect. She is an uncommon, handsome, charming woman, and before a couple of years are over some smart fellow on the lookout for money will snap her up. No amount of matrimonial misery warns a widow off the line. Well, I must say good-day: this is my 'bus."

It was more than a week before Mrs. Crichton wrote to Adair; then she appointed the next day but one for his visit, and concluded, "I still feel strange and bewildered, but the children are with me again, and I am a little more like myself."

Adair could not settle to any occupation, so eager and feverish were his anticipations of the approaching interview. Nevertheless, he schooled himself rigidly to maintain the kindly calmness of an old friend in voice and look and manner when he again looked into the eyes he loved so well and heard the voice which gave a charm to everything it uttered.

The morning of the day appointed by Mrs. Crichton, just as Adair was starting for Sutherland Gardens a telegram was put into his hand. It was from his sister, announcing the sudden seizure by paralysis of his mother, and begging him to come to them at once. There were many matters to arrange in the next few hours, but first he would see Constance and show her the telegram.

Mrs. Crichton received him with grave, gentle composure, and sympathized warmly in his distress respecting his mother. "You must not waste time here, Norman, when you have so much to do. As to myself, I have nothing decided to tell you. I can make no plans until I know exactly how I stand; and I believe our affairs are rather complicated in consequence of Mr. Crichton's connection with various companies. But you will write

to me about your mother? and I will keep you informed of my movements."

"Yes, I must not stay. Thank heaven, I do not fear to leave you now!" exclaimed Adair. "Even if I am obliged to take my mother abroad, you are safe and free: no harm can come to you."

"Let us forget the past, Norman," she returned, with a slight increase of color: "I wish to bury it in my unfortunate husband's grave; for he *was* unfortunate, to be color-blind to the true aspects of life."

"You promise to write to me, then?" urged Adair, taking her hand and looking long and wistfully into her eyes.

"I shall be glad to write to and hear from you: let me know directly how you find your mother. Good-by, dear Norman, good-by, and God bless you!"

He kissed her hand, and was gone.

Mrs. Adair's illness proved to be long and critical, and her recovery exceedingly slow. When able to be moved, she was advised to try the south of Italy during the remainder of the winter and early spring. Norman could not leave to his sister the task of conveying the fragile invalid such a distance

unaided, and therefore took charge of the party, much to the delight of mother and daughter. In truth, he was not anxious to return to England immediately. He knew that Mrs. Crichton was safe and well; she wrote regularly, if not frequently, sometimes to him, sometimes to his sister, with whom she had renewed her intercourse, and he felt that if he were often with her, drinking in the delight of her presence, he could hardly hold back the avowal of his profound love for her, hardly resist the passionate pleading for a promise of future union; and this would, he knew, offend her. And thus the months rolled past hopefully, tolerably, and early spring had come round again when Adair permitted himself to return to London.

How delightfully familiar it seemed to him as he issued from his hotel the morning after his arrival! The interval since he left had been a period of stagnation, an emotional blank, and it slipped from his memory like water over a smooth decline. Was it yesterday or a year ago since he hailed the Kilburn omnibus and on that most prosaic conveyance drove away to meet his fate? A whole year ago,—the most inactive year of his life,—the one, the only one, which

could never be forgotten. Even though he ventured to hope for a happy future, still, happiness does not write its mark upon the soul like the fever and pain and unrest of a mental struggle. He hoped, chiefly because he dared not despair. After all, why should Constance refuse him? Of course she was too good, too fine a creature for him; but she knew him well, and trusted him,—ay, and liked him in a certain way. So, even without loving him as he loved her, she might be disposed to let him share her life as a tender sympathetic friend who would care for her children as if they were his own, and be a real helpmeet. "Of course I shall feel my way and be very prudent," thought Adair, as he rang the door-bell, and tried to keep himself cool and composed, though his heart was beating hard and his pulses were throbbing.

A strange servant opened the door,—a trifle which struck Adair as an evil omen.

"Mrs. Crichton was at home: would he walk in?"

He did, and was ushered up to the dreary drawing-room, dreary now no longer. A bright fire burned in the grate, books and work lay around; but in the back room was

a large packing-case, and a variety of ornamental articles lay about it. Evidently some change was in progress. But he had no time to conjecture further, for Mrs. Crichton came in quickly, with both hands outstretched.

"My dear Norman! This is delightful! I had no idea you would be here so soon."

"Soon! It seems to me infinite ages since I saw you."

He stood holding her hands and gazing in delight at the radiant health, the serene content, that beamed in her fair face. She had evidently flushed with pleasure at seeing him, for the brilliant color faded somewhat as they exchanged inquiries and then sat down for a long talk.

"And your mother will return in June? How pleased I shall be to see her! You know, Norman, I used to be a little afraid of her: she was very stately."

"She is very fragile now. I fear I must give up the project of settling her in Scotland, though she would like it: she could not stand the climate."

Here a pause occurred. Adair found it harder and harder to preserve the calm, friendly tone he had prescribed for himself.

Loving, passionate words sprang to his lips and then he knew he could not keep hi eyes silent while he tried to regain sel control.

Mrs. Crichton rose, and, crossing the roo to a writing-table on which lay letters an papers, unlocked a drawer and took out thick envelope. "There, Norman," sh said, placing it in his hand, "at last I a able to pay the kindest creditor any one eve had,—at least all that can be paid, which i but little. From the full obligation I neve wish to be relieved."

"But, Mrs. Crichton—Constance, I d not want this."

"No, perhaps; but you will find som other poor wretch to help. There, put i away; and none can ever know how yo helped me in my sorest need."

Adair had too much delicacy to refuse but the little incident seemed for a momen to raise up a barrier between them; his im pulse to avow his feelings for her was checked and while he hesitated she went on to speal of the children.

"You know," added Mrs. Crichton "that I have had my poor Mary with me al the winter. We shall never part again. Sh

is a new creature, as you will see; though she suffers at times. I have also told you that we shall not be so well off as I at first expected; but I have quite enough, and we have just succeeded in getting rid of the lease of this house: you see I am beginning to pack up."

"And where are you going?"

"I am in treaty for a sweet old house with a big lawn and garden near W——, on the Epsom and Leatherhead Line. I do hope I shall get it: my darlings will blossom like roses in the delightful air; and it is scarcely half an hour from town, so you can run down and see us, Norman, when you are ashore; for I suppose you *will* go to sea?"

A thrill of cold despair shivered through him. What did all these plans mean, in which he could take no part? Prudence, caution, all went by the board: he must grasp this lovely, lovable woman for whom his heart ached.

"But is it—is it wise to bury yourself alive in a suburban country place,—the most lonely of all places?" he exclaimed, in imploring tones. "You, at your age!—You, so suited to enjoy and charm! I don't like to hear of it. I—— Constance, for God's sake

don't plan out your life without leaving room in it for me! You must know that I am devoted to you heart and soul. Let me give my existence to you and your sweet children: I love them for your sake and their own. You could trust your happiness to me, and you can take your own time. I would not ask you to do what is unbecoming. You don't know how utterly you have taken possession of me; but you must know that I love you,—have loved you almost from the first."

"Yes, Norman," she said, softly, while she grew paler, "I did fear it, even when I felt most grateful to you. You have been so true, so considerate, to respect me as you have done in spite of my cowardly want of respect for myself. But, dear old friend, I have no love to give you, not the kind of love you deserve. All I once possessed has been scathed, destroyed, by the terrible degradation of my past life. No words could express to you the loathing with which I shrink from the idea of marriage; the possibility would make me hate any man,—even *you*, for whom I have the highest regard. Ah, had you been my husband originally, I could have indeed been happy! And you,

Norman, when you know that I am safe and well and utterly content, you will throw off this affection——"

"You don't know what you are saying!" he broke in, passionately. "My life will be wrecked. I have existed for the last six months on the hope of winning you. Don't, Constance, don't throw me aside. You are too young to have done with love. These painful memories will fade and existence put on its spring attire. Do not reject me without some consideration."

"It would not be kind to you, Norman, either to hesitate or to accept you. It is impossible to put into words the horror of marriage which my married life has stamped deep into my soul. Throw yourself into your profession, and the forgetfulness you prophesy for me will come to you. Then you will meet some fair young girl whose fresh heart will be all yours, Norman,—you are a man whom any woman might love,—some creature who has never been bruised and wounded and dragged through the mire as I have been."

"You exaggerate!" cried Adair, passionately. "But even if it were true, bruised, wounded, mire-stained, you would still be

my queen." And he held out his arms to her.

She turned from him and burst into tears. "You only grieve, you cannot change me, Norman."

And still he pleaded, till her white cheeks, her steady distressed eyes, suddenly struck conviction into his heart, and he ceased to speak. A painful pause ensued.

"I feel my words are vain except to vex you. Constance, can you consent to lay down your youth?"

"It has left me for the present," she said, "but it will revive again as my children grow to be companions. Their freshness will be infectious. The one boon I have prayed for during the past dreadful years has been peace. I shall have it now. I can watch over my sister and atone for the desolate past, and I can redeem the weakness and errors of early days by firmness in the care of my children. Dear Norman, had I the smallest tinge of love for you, could I have said no?"

He stood for a moment in despairing silence. Then, in a voice hoarse with emotion, he exclaimed, "It is good-by, then,—and a long good-by."

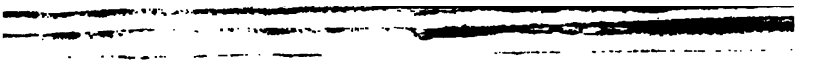
"But not for always, Norman? When—when you are yourself again, you will be my friend?"

"Farewell!" he returned. "I will never vex you more."

A long look, as if to learn her face by heart, and, without even attempting to touch her hand, he turned and left the house.

"Good-by, Norman,—good-by. Would to God we had met and loved before!" she murmured, bursting into a passion of tears.

THE END.



BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

FOR HIS SAKE. FOUND WANTING.

12mo. Paper, 50 cents; cloth, $1.00.

A FIGHT WITH FATE.
A GOLDEN AUTUMN.

12mo. Cloth, $1.25.

"Mrs. Alexander's novels will always have a circle of devoted readers. They have plenty of incident, are carried on by charming characters, and are overflowing with sentiment."—*Boston Journal.*